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How to Get Those Personal Referrals

By [Kaitlin Madden](#) on May 14, 2010 in [Career Advice](#), [Featured](#), [Job Search](#)

Personal referrals are important in the hiring process for the same reason customer reviews are important when making a big purchase. Before entering into an expensive or long-term commitment, people want reassurance that they're making a good choice — for a hiring manager that means personal referrals act as a testimony of sorts for a candidate's professional abilities.

“A referral conveys a level of reference and trust, just like having a stamp on your resume from working at a name brand company,” says Kathy Ullrich, [president](#) of Kathryn Ullrich and Associates, an executive recruiting firm. “When I moderated a panel of executive recruiters at Stanford Graduate School of Business, all of the recruiters said that the chance that they would look at an unsolicited resume was slim. However,” she continues, “if the sender mentioned in the e-mail that they were a referral of someone trusted by the [recruiter](#), then not only did the likelihood of the recruiter looking at the resume increase dramatically, but also the possibility that the recruiter would speak with the person directly as a courtesy.”

To be clear, personal referrals can either be recommendations in letter form — or just the simple blessing from someone in your [network](#) to reach out to one of their contacts, i.e. “John Doe suggested I contact you about the open position.”

Here's what you need to know about securing either type of testament to your hard work.

Who to ask

“Recommendations should come from respected peers within your industry,” says Brad Ellis, a [partner](#) at Kaye/Bassman, an international recruiting firm. “The best letters come from people you have reported to, preferably your previous boss.”

Susan Howington, president and [CEO](#) of Power Connections, a professional networking firm, says that getting recommendations from people you’ve worked with in a variety of capacities, however, will give the best overview of your skill set. “Recommendations should come from bosses, peers, subordinates, fellow board members AND let’s not forget customers — this gives a full 360-degree perspective that can be very impressive,” she says.

How to ask

When asking favors of your contacts, it’s important to be targeted and specific in your request.

If you’re asking someone you know for a contact at a company you may be interested in, Ullrich suggests something to the effect of: “As you know, I’ve been a [product manager](#) most recently at a [mobile applications](#) company and worked on X, an application that you may have used on your iPhone. I’m looking for product management roles at larger companies with mobile applications groups, companies like Apple, Google or Microsoft. Do you know anyone you can refer me to at these companies?” By stating your goal and your understanding of how your skills fit with the company you’re interested in, your referrer will feel more confident in providing you a contact, she says.

Explaining why you need a referral can also be helpful, Ellis says. “For example, say: ‘I am competing for a [director](#) level position and I am in the running with five other candidates ... a reference from you (considering you had such an influential impact to me in the business as my mentor) would help solidify my ability to attain the job and demonstrate similar results in this new career change,’” he says.

Howington also suggests making the process simple for those you are calling upon for the favor. “I always tell my clients to actually provide some sample verbiage or content to those they are requesting the recommendation from. I think that people are appreciative of the gesture and most will approve the

suggested content. If nothing else, it gets the ideas flowing and they might even embellish your original thoughts so you will end up with an even better recommendation than you had anticipated,” she says.

What to ask for

If you’re asking someone for an actual recommendation letter, “it should focus on cost saving initiatives, money brought in, turnaround situations where you helped improve your previous department, stability of your work history and of course how well they rate your performance,” Ellis advises.

Ellis says the best referral letters convey the following:

- The candidate has done the job before
- The candidate is self-motivated and coachable
- The candidate has brought in — or saved — money for his or her previous employer
- The candidate is stable and not a job hopper
- The candidate’s proficiencies

Ellis also advises that referral letters be geared toward specific positions whenever possible. “[Candidates should] match themselves to the hiring authority’s ‘hot buttons,’ or their motivating factors for hiring. Specific letters showing a correlation to the job you are applying to are the best.”

Do LinkedIn referrals count?

“Yes, LinkedIn referrals do count,” Howington says. “But don’t be fooled, good recruiters will check and track the referrals through LinkedIn. If the referrals look contrived or superfluous — like a situation where you tell someone, ‘If you write me a recommendation, then I’ll write you a recommendation’ or if it appears that you are going for quantity versus quality of recommendations — their impact can be diminished in the eyes of the reader,” she says.

In terms of finding people in your network that might refer you to a company you are interested in, Ullrich says LinkedIn is a good tool, but should not be the end all be all in your networking and referral efforts. “The recruiters on the panel [at Stamford] all wanted communications via e-mail rather than LinkedIn,” she says.