

THE INTRODUCTION GAME

An exercise you can do with friends to find out what you do and why anyone should care.

By Jonathan Stark

© 2020 Jonathan Stark Consulting, Inc.

THE INTRODUCTION GAME

Sent by Jonathan Stark on January 26th, 2018

Positioning yourself well is a really hard thing to do. It requires that you see yourself through the eyes of someone else - namely, your ideal buyers.

This is the polar opposite of what most independent professionals do in their marketing, which is this:

They list their skills, capabilities, and certifications.

ASIDE: I suspect that this tendency originates from resume writing advice, which is sort of understandable, but is almost always a terrible thing to do.

I'm working on creating an exercise that will help you improve your positioning *by you helping someone else with their positioning.*

For now, I'm calling it The Introduction Game. The mechanics of the exercise are not fleshed out yet but the idea is to reach out to a self-employed friend and start a conversation by saying:

"Hey there! I'd like to get better about referring work to my friends. What kind of clients are you looking for?"

PLEASE NOTE: The goal IS NOT to create some forced and cheesy "tit for tat" referral exchange scheme.

You ARE NOT trying to trick your friend into giving you an intro in exchange for one of yours.

For the purpose of this exercise, I don't care if you ever *actually* refer your friend or if they refer you.

What I am interested in is having you go through the process of *helping your friend articulate who they help with what*.

Keep going back and forth with them until 1. they either give up, or 2. you have an idea how you would write an intro email for them.

At the end of the convo, you would hopefully be able to say something like:

"If I come across a \$typeOfClientTheyWant who needs help with \$thingThat-TheyDo I'll be sure to send an intro!"

You're welcome to take this idea and try it out with a friend, but as I said above, I haven't worked out the mechanics yet.

If you have a few minutes, you could help me work this out by hitting reply and answering the question:

"What kind of clients are you looking for?"

Seriously, hit reply and let me know. It'd be a big help 😊👍

Yours,

—J

GRETCHEN WHO?

Sent by Jonathan Stark on January 27th, 2018

“What kind of clients are you looking for?”

It’s a simple question.

But most folks can’t answer it.

Well, they can answer it - but not in a way that would trigger the possibility of a referral.

Yesterday, I asked you this question in the context of something I’m calling The Introduction Game and I got back a bunch of replies (thanks everyone!)

The answers spanned the entire range of possibilities, from flippant non-answers (e.g., “someone with lots of money who wants to pay me”) to hyper specific answers that I’ll probably remember for years (e.g., “people who own thoroughbred horses”).

Remember, I asked this question in the specific context of referrals.

For the sake of this exercise, I want to play the part of matchmaker between you and the thousands of people I am connected to.

If your answer is too vague or I don’t understand it, *I can’t start running through my mental Rolodex looking for matches*. I just don’t have enough information.

The more specific you are, the more likely I am to start looking for a match.

Of course, just because I’m looking for a match doesn’t mean I’ll find one - I might not know someone who fits the description.

But - and maybe this is just me - scrolling through my Rolodex and *not* finding a match sticks in my head.

It's like half a high five, just hanging there in midair.

Now I *want* to find a match. That open loop is going to stick in my head and ever so slightly nag at me. I might even start mentioning it to other people in hopes of scratching that itch.

Real life example:

As I was typing this message up, I asked Google Assistant how to spell "thoroughbred".

My wife gave me a confused look and asked, "You working on something for Gretchen?"

"Gretchen who?" I asked back.

She replied:

"My aunt Gretchen. She owns Arabians. And you know Jenny and Maryann both own horses, right? I don't know if they're thoroughbreds but I can ask. And oh yeah, my old boss Alison owned show horses."

See what I mean? In the context of referrals, incredible specificity about who you want to work with can unlock the exponential magic of network dynamics.

The numbers are non-intuitive. It *seems* like the odds of me knowing someone who owns thoroughbred horses are near zero, but it turns out I'm related to one and possibly know three others.

Just as an experiment, I'd be curious to know:

Are YOU connected to someone who owns thoroughbred horses?

Please hit reply and let me know 😊👍

Yours,

—J

WHERE MY HORSE PEOPLE AT?

Sent by Jonathan Stark on January 28th, 2018

When it comes to asking your contacts for introductions to potential clients, it pays to be very specific about what kind of client you want to connect with.

This is because high specificity triggers a Rolodex Moment, which in turn unlocks the exponential magic of network dynamics.

To prove my point, yesterday I asked:

"Are you connected to someone who owns thoroughbred horses?"

It seems to me that "thoroughbred horse owners" is an almost comically small target market. Still, I was fairly confident that I'd get a few replies.

I was not disappointed.

So far, 12 people have replied saying they know someone who personally owns thoroughbred horses, or owns regular horses and might know a thoroughbred owner.

Horses... what are the odds? Pretty good, it turns out.

Long-time reader and "friend of the show" Matt K said it best:

"It's amazing how the world explodes when you get hyper-specific, and does absolutely nothing when you don't."

Yours,

—J

TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE?

Sent by Jonathan Stark on January 29th, 2018

You're probably not going to believe this but the thoroughbred horse leads are still rolling in.

I got another dozen or so today, including one person who's family "boards thoroughbred horses for people up and down the east coast."

So, in roughly 48 hours y'all sent in what amounts to probably more than fifty direct or "friend of a friend" connections to horse people.

If I was looking to research this market or had a product or service for them, I'd be buried in introductions.

My next step would be to set up as many phone calls as I could handle. Assuming I'm not a complete buffoon, these would likely be productive conversations.

And if my offerings represent a good value for this audience, I could be selling stuff as quickly as a few days after my first email.

If this seems too good to be true, remember that there was a non-trivial precondition:

I was hyper specific about who I was looking to connect with.

Here's my original ask again:

"Are you connected to someone who owns thoroughbred horses?"

What do you think would have happened if instead I had asked something like:

"Do you know any small to medium sized businesses looking to leverage custom software?"

Nothing, that's what.

People will fall all over themselves to help you, but you have to give them the tools to do so. Being crystal clear about what you're looking for helps.

Yours,

–J

ESP NOT REQUIRED

Sent by Jonathan Stark on January 30th, 2018

Your friends, family, colleagues, and clients will happily refer business your way *if you give them the tools to do so.*

Being crystal clear with yourself and your network about what kind of clients you're looking for is a great first step.

So:

"What kind of clients are you looking for?"

Five days ago, I challenged you to answer this question. Tons of people replied (thanks gang!).

As I went through the answers some patterns emerged. There was one in particular that I saw more than any other:

The provided selection criteria was unknowable to anyone other than very close business associates.

Some examples would be answers like:

- "I'm looking for businesses that are about to enter a rapid growth phase."
- "I'm looking for businesses that want to deliver a better mobile experience."
- "I'm looking for businesses that need to automate internal processes."

For the sake of argument, I'll call this "ESP Referrals" because there is *no way* I'm going to know who among the thousands and thousands of people I'm connected with "are about to enter a rapid growth phase".

(Yes, I'm in a couple business-focused masterminds and things like these might come up in conversation there. But that is a group of maybe 100 people instead of multiple thousands. If this is enough for your business, then great! But the odds of a referral are significantly lower.)

The good news is, you might be able to avoid the "ESP Referrals" pattern by correlating the internal need to something that would be more obvious to the casual observer.

Things like:

- "I'm looking for businesses that just raised Series B funding."
- "I'm looking for businesses that have a terrible mobile app."
- "I'm looking for business owners who are always missing family events."

These are admittedly still a bit esoteric, but they don't require ESP. They are knowable from the outside. They are the kinds of things that might come up in casual conversation, or appear in someone's social media feed, or could be discovered with a simple online search.

But we can do even better, I think. After some back-and-forth with most people, I was able to come up with something that fit their desired client profile AND triggered a Rolodex Moment for me, *but was completely different from their original answer.*

The moral of the story?

Try playing The Introduction Game with a friend. Keep asking them for clarification on their desired client until you have a Rolodex Moment or give up. Then switch.

Yours,

—J

WHY SHOULD ALICE CARE?

Sent by Jonathan Stark on February 1st, 2018

If my old friend Bob asked me for an introduction to potential clients, I'm going to need to know two things:

- What kind of people are Bob's ideal clients?
- Why they should care about talking to Bob?

We've been talking about the first question for a week or so and have come to the conclusion that the more obvious and specific Bob's "ideal client" criteria, the more likely I am to have a Rolodex Moment.

Today, I want to focus on the second question.

Let's say Bob makes mobile apps. And let's say Bob sends me the following message:

"Hey JS! Are you connected with anybody who owns thoroughbred horses? If so, I'd love an intro. Thanks! –Bob"

Lo and behold... I know someone who has a business breeding thoroughbred horses! Her name is Alice.

Now... I like Bob. I've known him for a long time and I trust him. I think that he and Alice would dig each other on a personal level.

But... this is a *business* intro, not a personal one.

I am going to want to provide a *credible business-related reason* to make the intro. I am going to want to include something in the intro that will peak Alice's interest in Bob. *I am going to want Alice to eventually thank me for introducing her to Bob!*

The email I WANT to send to Alice would be something like:

"Hey Alice! FYI - My friend Bob does mobile apps for horse breeders. We were just chatting and he mentioned that he helped EquineNow.com more than double their revenue last year. Would you like an intro?"

We can abstract this to a template:

"Hey \$name1! FYI - My friend \$name2 does \$thing for \$industry. We were just chatting and s/he mentioned that s/he helped \$industryLeader \$hugeWin. Would you like an intro?"

Of course, the critical variables here are \$industryLeader and \$hugeWin

Could you fill those in for your business?

Hit reply and let me know :)

Yours,

—J

REFERRING STRANGERS

Sent by Jonathan Stark on February 2nd, 2018

In response to yesterday's message (i.e., "Why should Alice care?"), long-time reader John Tseng wrote in with a hyper-specific target market and a head-turning reason why Alice would want to talk to him (*shared with permission, slightly edited for clarity*):

Hi Jonathan, This is awesome! I've been churning over this kind of stuff for the past year, and I've always come up with ESP-required messaging, but now that I've decided to focus on machine learning for sports betting, it's helped make this stuff a lot easier to come up with. It's a nice plus that I enjoy the work more. =D Here's the referral you could send for me: Hey Alice! FYI - My friend John creates machine learning algorithms for sports betting. We were just chatting and he mentioned that he helped Scotty McKeever win \$100k at a recent betting tournament. Would you like an intro? I'm going to update my profile now. =) –John

If we assume that Alice is in John's hyper-specific target market (i.e., sports betting tipsters), she's probably going to know who Scotty McKeever is and she'll presumably be impressed with the results.

In fact, I'd be willing to wager that if you know someone in the sports betting space, you are wondering right now *if you should intro them to John*.

And you don't even know John!

Why would you consider introducing a friend to a complete stranger who you heard about on some maniac's mailing list?

Because John's *value proposition is crystal clear* and his *bold claim is easily verifiable*.

And talk about memorable! I mean c'mon... "Machine Learning for Sports Betting"? You couldn't forget that if you tried. If you meet a sports betting person at a party a year from now, you're going to remember this message.

I would love for your network to be able to give you equally strong, memorable referrals. As a reminder, here's the "Referral I WANT to Write" template from yesterday:

"Hey \$name1! FYI - My friend \$name2 does \$thing for \$industry. We were just chatting and s/he mentioned that s/he helped \$industryLeader \$hugeWin. Would you like an intro?"

Get creative and hit reply!

Yours,

—J

WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE ME TO SAY?

Sent by Jonathan Stark on February 5th, 2018

Has a friend ever asked you to act as a reference? Or to introduce them to prospective clients in your contact list? Or to connect them with an influencer you know?

It's WICKED HARD, right?

You *really want* to help your friend out, but you have *no clue* what to say on their behalf.

Even if you know them very well, you probably find that you can't come up with a single word that doesn't sound like complete fluff.

You start to get very stressed out. You procrastinate. You secretly hope they'll forget about the whole thing.

Good news!

I get requests like these fairly regularly and have found a solution...

When a friend, colleague, student, or some other acquaintance asks me to write something on their behalf, I say:

"Sure! Draft whatever you want me to say and I'll tweak as necessary."

The shocking truth is that probably 95% of people who ask me to say something about them, *have no idea what they want me to say*.

In practice, this means that the vast majority of the time they never send me a draft - and I'm off the hook.

But every once in a while, someone will send a draft to me. We tweak it into shape very quickly, and I happily forward to the desired recipient.

If you would like a friend to intro you to someone (e.g., a podcast host, conference organizer, ideal client) please DO NOT expect them to magically know what to say on your behalf, ESPECIALLY if you yourself don't know what to say!

Do them the kindness of figuring out what you want communicated BEFORE contacting them.

Make it easy for them to do what they want to do naturally - i.e., connect two of their contacts for a mutually beneficial partnership.

Yours,

—J

THE BENEFITS OF PLAYING

Sent by Jonathan Stark on February 7th, 2018

The most reliable way I know to command premium rates is to specialize.

Expressing this specialization clearly and consistently in your marketing will position you as an expert in the minds of your ideal buyers.

If you have experimented with positioning your own business, you probably found it to be terrifying. Like one of those dreams where you suddenly realize you're sitting in math class completely naked. (Just me? Mokay, never mind...)

Positioning expert Philip Morgan calls this “nakedness” reaction [The Fear](#).

Updating your website and LinkedIn bio and email signature and everything else with a laser-focused statement about who you help and what you help them with feels like career suicide.

For the last couple weeks, I've been working on an exercise called The Introduction Game that would hopefully de-fear positioning for students. Something that would allow them to experiment with positioning in a safe environment.

It boils down to this...

Pick a friend who you think might be looking for more clients and ask the following two questions:

- Who would you like me to introduce you to?
- What would you like me to say to them?

Don't let them off the hook with either question.

The answer to question 1 should be clear enough that you immediately think of one or more people you know who fit the description, OR you think you know somebody who might.

The answer to question 2 should be something remarkable. Something relevant to the target person. Something that would pique the target person's interest.

If your friend gives you an answer that makes you scrunch up your face, ask them to try again and again until what they're saying finally makes sense to you.

In other words, keep going until your face unscrunches.

In my experience doing this with about 30 people in the last couple weeks, it takes about three or four rounds of back and forth before the unscrunch happens.

Once you understand who your friend would like to be introduced to and what they'd like you to say, tell them how you'd *actually* introduce them to someone.

Make it conversational. It should be utterly factual and very brief. The slightest whiff of marketing speak or superlatives or stilted language will ruin it.

Here's an example template:

"Hey \$name1! FYI - My friend \$name2 does \$thing for \$industry. We were just chatting and s/he mentioned that s/he helped \$industryLeader \$hugeWin. Would you like an intro?"

Now it's your turn.

Reverse roles. Have your friend ask you the same two questions, go through the same scrunch/unscrunch brainstorming, and have them draft a conversational intro.

There are many benefits to this exercise. Here are three:

- It's private. You're not changing anything in public. To make the exercise feel even safer, you can agree in advance that you won't actually make any introductions.

- It's realistic. This is not you sitting in a dark room thinking really hard about what your positioning should be. This is an outsider reflecting back to you how impenetrable and muddled your current messaging actually is. And it gives you an example of what it should look like if you want normal humans to grok what you do.
- It's experiential. It's not an accident that I said to ask your friend the questions before they ask you. The experience of being on the receiving end of your friends soggy answers and helping sharpen their focus into something useful will make *you* better at letting go of your own soggy mess and recognizing the benefits of a more focused position.

Please do give this a try with a friend if you haven't already. I'm confident that you'll both end up with some valuable insights about how to better communicate the unique value your business provides to the world.

Let me know how it goes!

Yours,

—J

More Information

I hope you have found this short guide to be a useful resource.

For more free resources, please visit:

jonathanstark.com/free

If you have any follow-up questions or comments, please feel free to email me at:

jstark@jonathanstark.com

I look forward to hearing from you!

Yours,

—J

Jonathan Stark

jonathanstark.com