

How to get a meeting with a CEO

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Want that million dollar deal? Here's how to get your foot in the MD's door.

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So you want to meet the head of the company. Maybe you want to ask them for a job, possibly you want them to invest in your business, perhaps you just want the benefit of their sage advice. Here's what to do next.

Don't be intimidated

Granted, the person you're approaching is almost always going to be more powerful, senior and highly accomplished than you. But that doesn't mean that you don't have something to bring to the table or that they're not interested in meeting you. Chris Ridd, managing director of Xero Australia, says, "Xero actively encourages an open line of communication to senior employees. My own contact details are included on company announcements and press releases and neither I nor the executive team have executive assistants, precisely to encourage direct communication."

Make friends with the gatekeeper

It should be pointed out that Ridd is unusual among Australian CEOs in not having someone screening his messages. Cian McLoughlin, CEO of sales-coaching business Trinity Perspectives, says, "I train people to establish a relationship with the key decision-maker in organisations and have had plenty of experience chasing such people myself. My advice is to never try to trick or circumvent the EA the CEO has charged with guarding their precious time. In the unlikely event you do manage to bypass the executive assistant, the CEO is likely to reprimand them for not doing their job properly and you've just made an enemy for life. My strategy is to create a relationship with the gatekeeper. When I wanted to interview the CEO of a large multinational for a business book I was writing I started by ringing his EA and asking her about his availability, his preferred method of interacting with interviewers and whether I could send her some information. I didn't make any demands on her during that introductory phone call and she wasn't put in the position of having to say yes or no to a meeting request. But a couple of days later, she took the initiative and contacted me to suggest a couple of dates when the CEO would have some time free to meet with me."



Cian McLoughlin: create a relationship with the gatekeeper.



Chris Ridd encourages contact.

Or make friends with the CEO's friends

Dean Ramler, CEO of online furniture retailer Milan Direct, no doubt sums up the views of many time-poor CEOs when he says, "I'm bombarded with people trying to sell me something and I just don't have time to respond. The only way I'll have a meeting with someone is if they've worked with me or know a business connection of mine. A cold call isn't going to work but a referral from a contact just might."

Come up with an attention-grabbing gimmick

Nikki Jurcutz, CEO of first-aid training business PriorityCPR, says, "People don't realise the amount of long and boring proposals, boilerplate sales pitches and meeting requests that people running a business typically have to deal with. Those never make it through my PA but if you deliver something quirky, you just might get my attention. For instance, someone once send me a proposal in video form that was short and funny. I did watch that and, though it only went for a minute, I knew exactly what the benefits of the offer were by the end of those 60 seconds. Do something like that, which will make me smile and remember you or your company, and I'm much more inclined to want to be a part of what you're suggesting."

Have that elevator pitch polished to perfection

Every CEO or CEO chaser Fairfax spoke to emphasised that CEOs are under extreme time pressure and expect those who are impinging on their

time to be ready to supply a succinct summary of who they are, what they are proposing and why it would be in the CEO's best interests to consider that proposal. Ridd says: "My No.1 piece of advice is to recognise the person you're approaching is time poor so you need to be succinct. Get straight to the point rather than leaving lengthy voicemails or sending essay-length emails."

One final piece of advice: always remember that the heavy hitter you're now chasing was also once in the supplicant role themselves, desperately trying to attract the attention of VIPs in their industry. If you approach them appropriately, you'll often be pleasantly surprised by their willingness to hear you out.

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