

50 Coffees

by Michael Ehling



The best way to find a new job, learn something, launch a new business or project, or find employees or clients for an existing business is by talking with people you know and the people they know. That is, by networking. But networking can be icky or ineffective. How can we connect with people–

especially people we don't know—and effectively get their help while avoiding the ick?

I recommend 50 Coffees. This approach is based on an article published several years ago by entrepreneur Peter Thompson. Basically, you commit to having meetings—often over coffee—with 50 people. (“50?!!” you ask. Yes. 50.) You start with a handful of people you know and trust.

You may think that this approach will take too long. But I know of no faster way to get what you want. You start with general and exploratory conversations. They quickly become exciting, specific, and concrete possibilities and opportunities. Committing to 50 conversations is important; it helps you see things through and refine your possibilities, opportunities, and plans. Most people who use this approach begin to see opportunities long before they get to 50 coffees, often before they get to 15.

By the time you're done, you will very likely have achieved more than you imagined possible.

Here's how:

21 Pointers for 50 Coffees

The purpose of each coffee conversation is to get A: insight (ideas, ah-has, respectful kicks in the a**), B: guidance (to other people with whom you can have a similar conversation), and C: an update (on what your conversation partner is up to: projects, successes, challenges).

Start with 5 or 6 people you already know and whose opinions you trust. These people will help you find the next set of people to talk to. They, in turn, will help you find the next set of people, repeating until you get to 50 people.

Don't be too concerned about whether these 5 or 6 are the right people to start with. The people we know and trust are full of wisdom know lots of people.

Tell them what it's about. When asking for the coffee (whether live, via email, text, etc.), say what you are up to (looking for or starting a project or job, wanting to develop a skill, engaging a new market, changing your approach to your business, changing career direction, etc), that would love to

catch up with them, and that you would value their insights on your goal.

Make it easy for people to say yes to your request. Select a time and place that are convenient for them. Tell them you can keep the meeting to 20 minutes. Structure the conversation so that you can finish up in 20 minutes. Most people will be happy to chat longer and all will appreciate you structuring it so they can leave after 20 minutes.

It doesn't have to be coffee. It can be tea. :-) If you or they can't make it for a coffee or tea meeting, calls or video calls are fine. Meetings over meals or evening beverages are fine, too; they are more expensive. Since you'll be paying, manage your budget appropriately.

Keep it natural. In the meeting, present what you are trying to do (e.g. "start this business" or "get a job in this industry") and ask for their insights and suggestions. Let it be a natural conversation. Write down each insight or suggestion. Avoid criticizing any insight or suggestion. Your best response to any insight or suggestion (ever) is, "Thank you."

Ask for guidance. Sometime before the end of the coffee, ask, “Who else should I talk to?” or “Who do you know who might be good for me to speak with next?” Write down each name. Ask if they would make the connection for you.

Ask about them. Sometime before the end of the coffee, ask, “What’s new with you? What are you up to?” As you learn about their current projects/work, ask what sort of information or contacts would be helpful to them. Since you already have a good network and since you’ll be speaking to 49 other people, chances are high that you can make a connection for them sometime in the near future.

It’s not an interview or sales call. Note that you are NOT asking for a job, for their business, or for leads. You are asking for insight, guidance, and updates. Some of your coffee partners may have a job for you, a project/need for what you offer, or a lead to someone who needs what you offer. That’s great! Be open and gracious, of course. Before the end of the coffee, agree with them the next step(s) (that is, who will do what by when).

Follow up. After each coffee, send a thank you email. Include a quick summary of their insights. List the people they mentioned (guidance) and ask them for the relevant contact details or for an introductory email. Include also a summary of their update and the information or contacts they are looking for. If they have given you names of people to contact and/or if they have expressed interest in you helping them (via your business or as an employee), list the agreed next steps.

Track you meetings. After each coffee, record those insights, guidance (people), and updates in a spreadsheet (or if you want to be fancy, in a CRM). Use this spreadsheet to track your progress, remember who referred you to whom, and get future encouragement (when you review past conversations). It will also help you remember which person would appreciate what help or connections as you meet more and more people.

Watch for progress. After about 5 coffees, you'll start to see some patterns and common, helpful wisdom. After about 15-20 coffees, you will likely have at least one good job prospect, one new client, one terrific idea, and/or a handful of good leads.

Debug. If you don't see progress, try the debugging steps below.

Adapt as you go. With each meeting, you will learn. Feel free to adapt what you discuss or ask for in subsequent coffees. What you ask in your 10th or 20th coffee will be different from what you asked in your first and will ask in your 50th.

Send updates. Every once in a while, send an update email to everyone you've met so far. Send individual emails or use BCC. Tell them what you've learned, how your business/career ideas have evolved, how much fun you're having, how you appreciate all their help, how you've been able to return the favor for some people already, and what you're currently trying to figure out.

Circle back. As you progress, you may want to speak again with certain people. You may want to get their take on something you've learned. You may just want to ask them for encouragement. This is fine. Make it easy for them.

People want to help. You may be worried that people don't want to be bothered or will somehow feel uncomfortable if you ask them for a coffee or for help. You may think asking for

help means you're not strong/capable/adult enough. You may even feel that you are asking for something valuable without compensation. But they are compensated. Please keep in mind that, generally, people like to help. They are flattered when you ask. They feel great when they see that they have helped. And their estimation of you rises when you genuinely ask for specific help. You are also "paying them back" in coffee and potential future information or connections for their projects. When you find a potential connection for them, ask them first if it's okay for you to make an introduction.

Some people may be negative. Count on roughly 20% of the people you meet with to be avid supporters. Roughly 60% will be happy to support you with varying levels of follow-through. And up to 20% of the people you reach out to will be negative. Because they are busy, having a bad day (or bad life), or because they just don't get the value of helping others this way, these few people may not respond to your request, may reject the request, may agree to meet but rain down negativity on you and your project, or may refuse to connect you with others. Expect these reactions. And recognize that their reactions are none of your business. Unless you were

somehow rude to them and need to make an apology, it's really about them. Don't let yourself become deflated when you encounter people acting like this.

Stay positive. This does not mean paste over your fear, uncertainty, and doubt with positive-sounding thoughts. It means catching yourself when you are down/thinking negatively, saying to yourself, "Clearly, I'm thinking about something I don't want. What do I want? What's one thought I can think that feels better than this? And what thought feels even better?" Get to a state of real hope/expectation that what you want is on its way to you.

You can add me as one of your "50 coffees." We can meet live, by phone, or by Zoom.

In your corner,

Michael

PS: Debugging. On very rare occasions, you may get to the end of 50 meetings with no appreciable results. Here are three tips for debugging your 50 Coffees process.

Clear your Yeah Buts. You may have one or more beliefs about yourself, the world, or your situation that are getting in the way. You can tell this is true because you feel bad (physically) when you consider your goal/project. List your Yeah Buts. They often take the form, "I really want X but...". Example: "I really want a job like that, but the pay isn't good." Yeah Buts stop us cold; they prevent us from thinking creatively and using our talents to solve the problems in front of us. The good news is that every Yeah But is really an unacknowledged need, want, or desire that we can solve for. **For each Yeah But, list what you really want.** Example: "What I need is to do the work I love and find a way to have the money I want, too. No matter what happens, I need a solid financial foundation." This may seem a trivial re-stating of the Yeah But. It is, however, now in a form that you can tackle. It's out in the open and ready to solve.

Get feedback and feedforward. People you've met with may have further insight into your process. One person, for instance, struggled with 50 Coffees because they were being too mechanical. Thinking they needed to be professional, they came off as harsh and robotic. Ask some of your 50 Coffees

contacts for feedback (“What did you think of how I conducted our coffee meeting?”) and feedforward (“What suggestions do you have so I can improve?”). Your only response to feedback or feedforward is, “Thank you.” You don’t need to take all of the advice you receive. But a good chunk of what you hear will be useful. Implement those useful suggestions.

Try a sub-goal. Perhaps your goal is too large to achieve right away. Pick (or get insight from others to help pick) a smaller milestone that’s on the way to your bigger goal. It’ll be easier to get traction and get going with something more manageable.

Of course, you don’t have to wait until you get to 50 meetings before debugging. If you ever notice resistance on your part or theirs, try these debugging steps.

From Robert

This article is brilliant! It is such a perfect process for connecting with people who can lead you to the people who can help you in some way or who can become clients.