The unspoken rules of making introductions in Silicon Valley

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Christian Thurston (https://www.techinasia.com/author/chris/)
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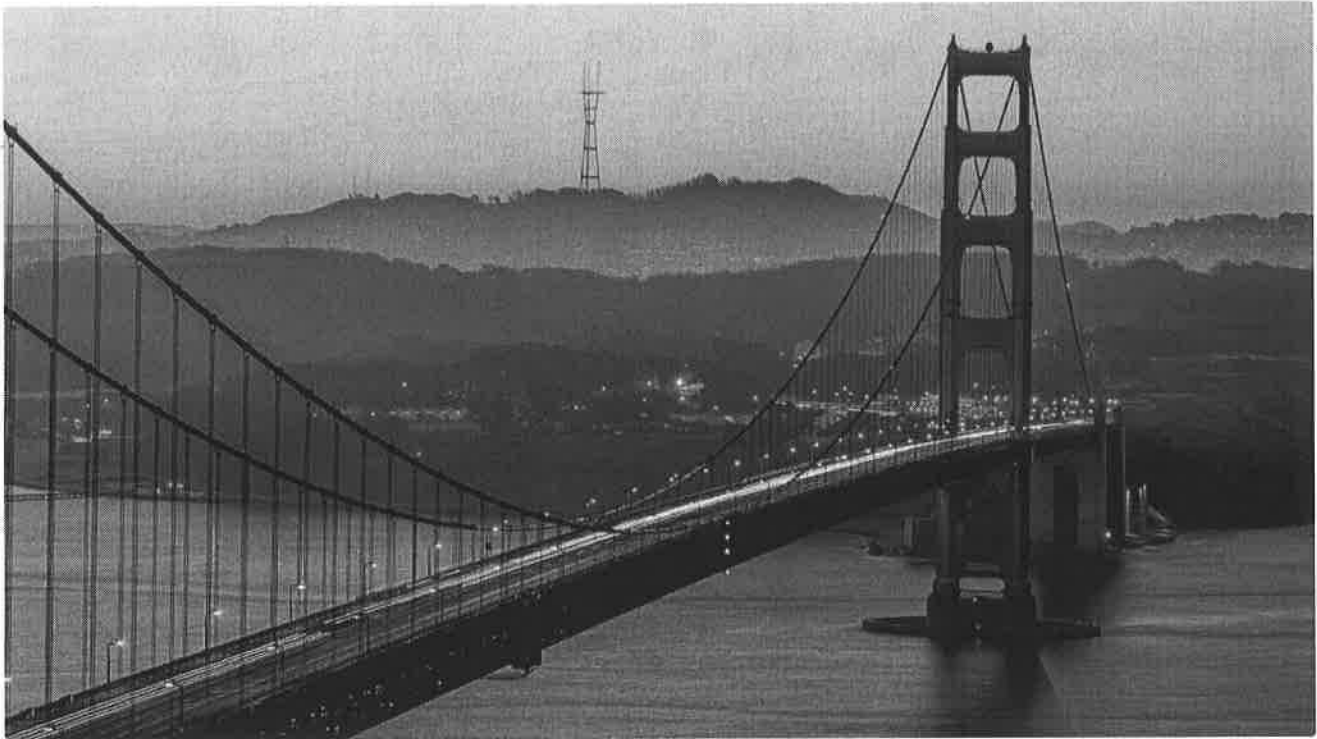introductions in Silicon Valley&url=https://www.techinasia.com/talk/unspoken-making-introductions-silicon-valley/)

> *"The future is already here — it's just not very*
> *evenly distributed" – William Gibson*
> *(https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/William_Gibson)*

Silicon Valley Culture

A lot has been written about how Silicon Valley, the global capital of startups and technology, differs from the rest of the world. In this post we'll use Silicon Valley, the Bay Area and San Francisco interchangeably. There's more venture capital activity in Silicon Valley (http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2016/01/global-startup-cities-venture-capital/429255/) than anywhere else in the world, and both the name and place are synonymous with innovation.

A magnet for the young and ambitious, it has its own business culture that, along with the technology it produces, gets exported and disseminated around the world. The use of email in business is an example of both a technical and cultural innovation that began in Silicon Valley before spreading elsewhere.

> **❝ *The only way to connect with a lot of the best investors is by getting a strong intro from someone they trust.* ❞**

In the introduction of Andy Grove's classic, *High Output Management (http://www.amazon.com/High-Output-Management-Andrew-Grove/dp/0679762884)*, Grove discusses the impact that email had on Intel's fight against Japanese competitors in the 1980s. According to the author, using email was central to Intel's success in transitioning to a better and stronger business model for the company. That might not sound too remarkable, until you consider that the first sitting US President to send an email was Bill Clinton in 1998 (http://gawker.com/5762812/the-two-emails-bill-clinton-sent-during-his-presidency/).

One of the most powerful workplace innovations was in full flight in Silicon Valley in the 1980s, a full decade before the world's most powerful man had even used it.

Introductions are one of the most powerful and frequently traded currencies in Silicon Valley. The only way to connect with a lot of the best investors is by getting a strong intro from someone they trust. There are several unwritten and unspoken rules that guide the etiquette for requesting, making and accepting intros. This usually trips up newcomers to the Bay Area.

Observing these guidelines will serve you well wherever you are in the world, and these practices are likely to become common place as the world transitions to a gig economy where introductions and networking will only increase in importance.

Allow me to introduce... the introduction

Email is a relatively new innovation in human history, whereas making introductions is one of the oldest business practices we have. Wherever there is commerce in the world, we have introductions. In every culture, access to the halls of money, power and influence has been contingent on networking, reputation and making introductions.

Like all business practices, the way an intro has been performed has shifted and changed over time, alongside the development of new technology and mediums of communication.

Until relatively recently in human history, introductions were always made face to face or through written correspondence. With email came the ability to easily introduce oneself over email threads, and new technologies (yes, there's even an app (http://entro.io/) for making intros) will continue to change how we meet new business contacts.

What hasn't followed as quickly is a widespread etiquette for making these intros. Here's a guide to the typically unwritten rules surrounding the intro in Silicon Valley.

Introductions in Silicon Valley

In Silicon Valley, introductions happen far more often than they do in the corporate world, and there's a prevailing etiquette for the right way to make introductions. This is something newcomers to the Bay Area typically have to learn. Violate this etiquette and you can end up leaving a bad impression, burning contacts and not building a network as efficiently as you otherwise could.

Your reputation is at stake

There are many types of currency in Silicon Valley. Money, talent and media attention all matter, but by far the most important asset you can build is your reputation. Whenever you make an introduction, you're investing in your reputation.

Intro misfires

Let's say you intro a founder to an investor and the founder is rude and unprofessional towards the investor. That investor will more than likely no longer take intros from you in the future. That means that whatever you want or need from the ecosystem in the future — funding, candidates, media — you no longer have access to from that investor.

Most careers in Silicon Valley will end up looking like random walks, and folks in tech understand this. You never know what you'll need from the ecosystem from one week to the next, so decreasing your options is a real loss.

It's pretty hard to undo this kind of damage. If you've had a long history of good interactions with this investor, they're more likely to be understanding about it, depending on their personality.

Intro wins

What about the scenario where you do the introduction and it goes really well? The angel invests in the founder's seed round and the startup goes on to become the next Uber. Let's just say the investor will probably always take your intros from then on.

The other way you get reputation currency is by taking intros when they come strongly recommended to you. This is the case when you know taking the intro will reflect well on the person making the introduction.

You also do this to maintain your relationship with the person making the intro. Deny their request, and it'll be difficult to get them to make intros for you in the future. Let's see what makes a strong intro in the Valley.

What you need to know before making an introduction

No intro is better than a weak one

Sometimes you'll get a request for an introduction to someone you don't know very well (the requester usually sees you're connected on LinkedIn). In these cases, you probably shouldn't make the intro unless the rationale for making one is exceptionally strong (see the scenarios below).

In these situations, it's perfectly fine to say to the person asking for the intro, "I'd love to be able to help you out, but to be honest I don't know them very well. I wouldn't want to spoil your chances with them by giving a weak intro. I'd suggest getting an intro from someone else who has a stronger connection to them."

If you go ahead and do the intro, you're more likely to alienate your contact and make an intro that hurts your friend instead of helping them. By making a weak intro, your friend loses the opportunity to have the impact they could have had if they'd received a strong intro instead.

Be wary of scene posers

There's another situation where you need to be careful about weak intros.

There are folks in the Valley who like to project an image that they're more influential or connected than they really are. You might meet and get along with one of these people, thinking they're a real "insider".

You might then ask them for an intro to an influential person they claim to know. This could end up hurting you in a few ways. For all you know, they may have a bad reputation in the Valley or be held in low esteem by the person they're introducing you to (sometimes the person making the intro might not even be aware of this).

Not only will the intro not stick, but your reputation may be tainted by association. You're especially unlikely to know the introducer's past when starting out, but this can happen to seasoned folks as well.

Pleading ignorance is an ineffective defense — that would imply you lack judgment in who you associate with or request introductions from. Or worse, you may not even realize the reason the introduction was declined. As with many situations in the Valley, you need to listen for the things that are either in the subtext or not said at all. The lesson is to be careful who you request intros from.

Be a gatekeeper

Often you'll get an intro request that doesn't look like it would add value to both sides. Or sometimes you've just met someone socially, and they want you to vouch for them professionally. In situations like these, you should find a tactful way to avoid making the intro.

How you decline the request depends on your personal style. The key thing is to only make introductions you would stake your reputation on. The power of your introductions is a function of how often you make them, and how valuable they are to the recipient. Dilute that and your introductions will fall flat, and you'll weaken your professional network.

Given that your network and reputation are your most important assets, you should

guard it closely.

The unspoken rules of making introductions in Silicon Valley

Always double-opt in

If there's only one rule you follow from this post, then make it this one: Always check with both sides if they would like to be introduced to each other. This is called the double opt-in. If both sides say "yes" then you have the double opt-in, and you can make the introduction.

> **"**
> *If in doubt, double opt-in.*
> **"**

This is especially important when the person requesting the introduction is a founder and the person they want to meet is an investor.

There are exceptions to this rule (see categories below) but you'll never upset anyone by doing the double opt-in. If in doubt, double opt-in.

Take "no" for an answer

If you're the person requesting the intro, be gracious and understanding when someone declines to make an introduction for you. You should take this "no" as final. By being gracious, you increase their likelihood of doing other introductions in the future.

Also be gracious if the person you're trying to get intro'd to says "no". This is a "no" you can take as a "not yet" if you're going to be persistent and follow-up. When being persistent in the Valley, it can be a fine line, and what will upset some folks will charm others.

There's no perfect method to make introductions, and that's the reason why fundraising, sales and hiring can often be referred to as a numbers game. Fortunately, the Bay Area is one of the few places where investors, customers and talent are in abundance.

Make it easy to say "yes"

When requesting an introduction, do your homework and be able to explain the value you would bring to the person you're trying to meet. This is something you need to show to both the person you're trying to meet, along with the person you're requesting the introduction from.

Show the introducer that you've put thought into it and that you have sound reasons for making the request. The more you can show alignment and make the introducer's job easier, the more comfortable they will be making the introduction for you.

If they choose not to make the intro, then they'll be able to give you good reasons why, now that they know your motivation and process. That feedback can often be more valuable than the introduction you were originally asking for.

Move the introducer to 'bcc' in emails

Once the introduction has been made, you should move the person making the intro to bcc in following emails. There are two reasons for this. The first is that you want to spare their inbox from getting multiple thread updates. Secondly, you may want to discuss something privately with the recipient. Both reasons are fair and legitimate.

So as a rule, you should always move the introducer to bcc on your response. That's a standard practice in the industry. It's stranger not to do this, than it is to do it. When the other person replies, the introducer will be out of the loop and you can continue your thread.

How about excluding them from responses altogether? The person doing the intro will want to know that you've responded politely. Including them in the response is reassuring, and they won't have to chase you to make sure you've reached out.

Coaching from the introducer

Sometimes you might get an odd response from the person you've been introduced to. If this happens after you've moved the introducer to bcc, then it's fair game to forward the response to the introducer to get a clarification or to give them a heads-up.

Often, they'll have some insight or input that will help you understand why you got that response. This is especially important and helpful in Silicon Valley where a lot of responses are written in coded language that has a specific meaning that isn't obvious to outsiders.

For example, let's say you get an intro to an investor, and five days later you get the response, "Can you circle back with me in 2-3 weeks. Swamped right now." You might ask your contact if the investor is blowing you off or if it's legitimate.

The contact might tell you, "Hey man, I checked in and the investor sits on the board of Acme Company. Acme is on fire right now because a judge just ruled that all of their freelancers are actually employees and it's a total sh#t show over there right now. She's interested but timing is off right now. I'll let you know when time is right to circle back so check with me on that in 2-3 weeks."

Or they might say: "I checked and they just closed on acquiring a similar company two days after I sent the intro. I would follow up politely but they're probably not going to invest in your next round."

Circle back

After you're met the person you've been introduced to, you should circle back to the person who did the introduction to thank them and let them know how it went. This is especially true if the intro went extremely well or extremely poorly.

That way, they know if they created value or not, and that data is useful for them when making future intros. It also shows you're conscientious and value their time. That's important if you expect them to do an introduction for you again in the future.

Advanced technique: stacking the deck

If possible, see if you can get multiple people to mention you to the person you're trying to meet. Of course, you can't do this in a way where it appears to them that you knowingly intro-bombed their email, so you'll have to make it appear to happen naturally.

This can be by spending time with, and impressing, three of their closest confidants over a short period of time.

They may each bring you up separately to the person you're trying to meet without you even asking. When that happens, the person you're trying to meet will probably request an intro to you.

This is an advanced technique that requires a lot of skill, but it's very effective if you're able to pull it off.
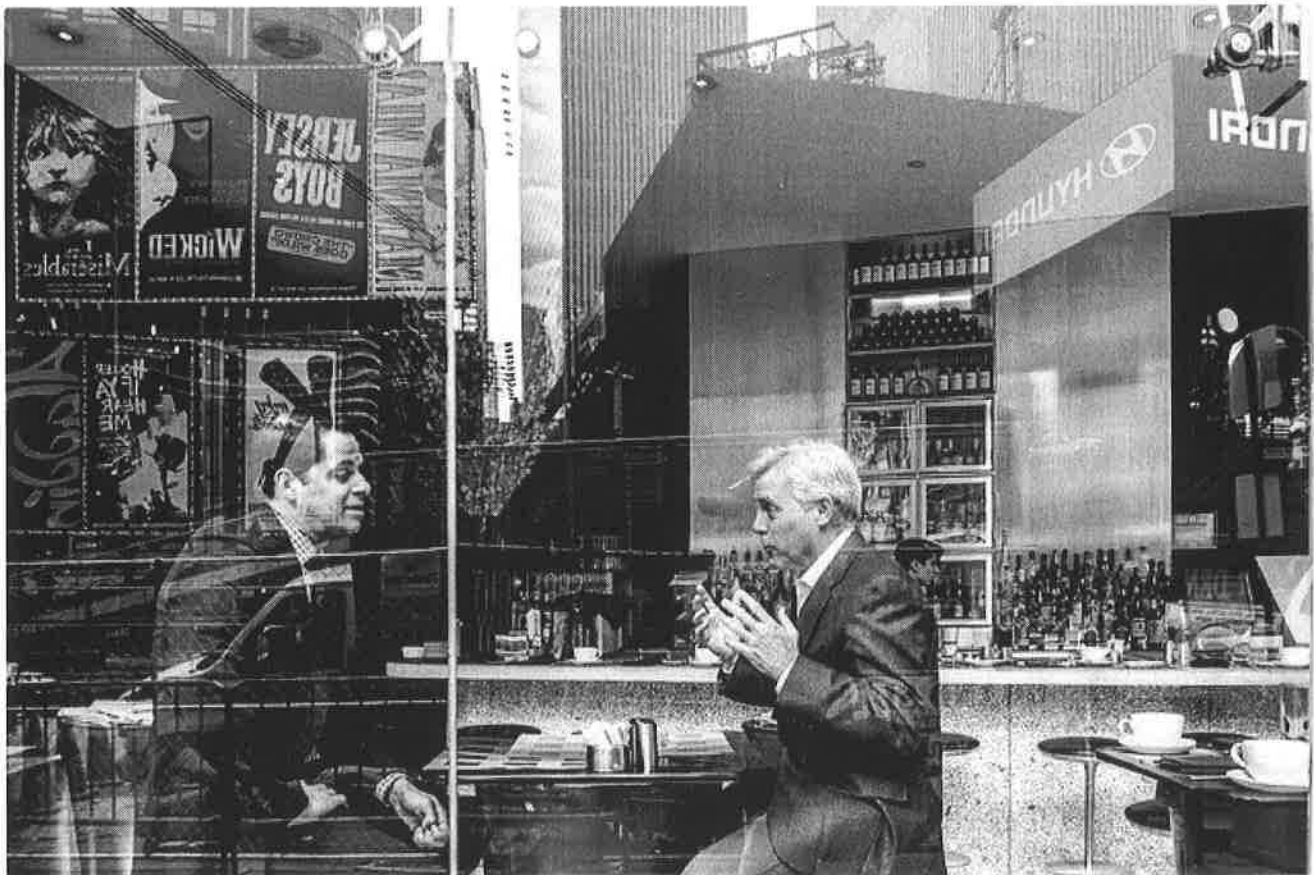
Common intro types

Photo credit: Jim Pennucci (%E2%80%9Chttps://www.flickr.com/photos/pennuja/13467178765/%E2%80%9D)

There are several common types of intros that happen in Silicon Valley. Here are some things to be aware of with each of them.

Low stakes — you two should meet

This is where you meet someone doing something interesting in a space, and you want them to meet another person you know in that space. As far as you know there's no specific agenda, you're just trying to facilitate serendipity — which is what the Valley is all about.

In this case, you should still follow the etiquette, but there's also a lot less riding on it. The upside is potentially quite high — they might become co-founders — and the downsides are low. In cases like these, you make the intro and let the two folks work out if a coffee meeting makes sense.

You should hire this person

This is when you meet or know someone ridiculously smart who is looking for their next project. They may have just started their search, and you want your contact (investor, employer or potential co-founder) to speak to them immediately. Time is of the essence and you should be super responsive. In this situation you can get away with not doing a double opt-in.

Why? Available talent is a highly valued currency in the Valley, and even if your contact can't hire them now, they'll want to see if they can connect them with a company they know that needs them.

That's why smart folks in the Valley are often surprised at how quickly they can get meetings at short notice from folks they've only just been introduced to.

Can you intro me to this investor?

This is one of the most common types of intro requests people get in Silicon Valley. This is when a founder wants you to introduce them to an investor you know so that they can pitch them. In this case, you need to be a strong gatekeeper.

Get the founder to send you a paragraph about their startup that you can forward to the investor. It's up to the founder to write a compelling paragraph that will appeal to the investor. As a gatekeeper, beware of founders who push back on sending paragraphs or decks to the investors (if the investor requests one).

Founders should also realize that they'll often have to pitch to the gatekeeper to get the intro. Some founders find this frustrating, but it makes sense when you consider what's at stake for the person making the intro.

Good intros are a virtue

Even if you're not in Silicon Valley, following these guidelines will improve the quality of your professional network and the introductions you make. The more someone receives intro requests, the more relevant and powerful these guidelines become — regardless of geography, culture or industry.

They may not be universally-acknowledged best practices but, just like using email in business, they soon will be. Observing these guidelines has few, if any, downsides and lots of upsides.

This article was first published on the Gigster blog (https://gigster.com/blog/intros-in-silicon-valley-teach-and-startups/).

Editing by Sim Yanting
(And yes, we're serious about ethics and transparency. More information here (/statement-of-ethics).)

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Shibasish Nandi (https://www.techinasia.com/author/shibasish-nandi/) 17h ago
Call it Silicon Valley Culture or whatever, but these are all practiced in India by default, social hardwired culture where every Jija, saala, mausa < brother in-laws, and uncles> are pampered by their in-house relatives for introduction to job or businesses...if you take up the movie Rasoiya, Jiterndra as lead hero, you will find him and same with other stories in the movies of same era. NRI uncles are mostly taken as gatekeepers who often listen to your ideas and then never call back. If you take movies like Devdas where Dev's father had a letter of recommendation, same salman had in the movie bhajrangi bhaijaan. " Shifarish' what we generally call it < this is not considered good practise offline> but digitally everything is taken as etiquette, skill and under the umbrella of mutual endorsements in some kind or volunteering.

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Lee Courtney (https://www.techinasia.com/author/lee-courtney/) 1d ago
Spot on. And useful even outside Silicon Valley. At this point in my Silicon Valley career I do find my network and relationships really are my currency.

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Huiyi Lee (https://www.techinasia.com/author/huiyi-lee/) 2d ago
Really love this piece. Refreshing content on TIA for sure. Double opt-in is so me. Haha.

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Willis Wee (https://www.techinasia.com/author/willis-wee/) 1d ago

> *If in doubt, double opt-in.*

very very true. it's actually the same for Asia too

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Christian Thurston (https://www.techinasia.com/author/chris/) 1d ago
Thanks. I imagine this will be true at the top end of any industry or anywhere in the
world where there's a lot of people whose time is valuable to others.

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