



**Steve Blank**, Contributor

Making a dent in entrepreneurial thinking.

---

ENTREPRENEURS | 8/06/2013 @ 9:33AM | 23,587 views

## How To Get Meetings With People Too Busy To See You

Asking, “Can I have coffee with you to pick your brain?” is probably the worst possible way to get a meeting with someone with a busy schedule. Here’s a better approach.

—

Jason, an entrepreneur I’ve known for over a decade, came out to the ranch today. He was celebrating selling his company and just beginning to think through his next moves. Since he wasn’t from Silicon Valley, he decided to use his time up here networking with other meetings with VC’s and company executives.

I get several hundred emails a day, and a good number of them are “I want to have coffee with you to bounce an idea off.” Or, “I just want to pick your brain.” I now have a filter for which emails get my attention, so I was curious in hearing what Jason, who I think of as pretty good at networking, was asking for when he was trying to set up meetings.

“Oh, I ask them if I can have coffee to bounce an idea off of them.”...Sigh.

I realized most entrepreneurs don’t know how to get meetings with people too busy to see you.

### Perfect World

Silicon Valley has a [“pay-it-forward” culture](#) where we try to help each other without asking for anything in return. It’s a culture that emerged in the ’60s semiconductor business when competitors would help each other solve bugs in their chip fabrication process. It continued in the 1970s with the emergence of the Homebrew Computer Club, and it continues today. Since I teach, I tend to prioritize my list of meetings with first my current students, then ex-students, then referrals from VC firms I’ve invested in, and then others. But still with that list, and now with a thousand plus ex-students, I have more meeting requests than I possibly can handle. (One of the filters I thought would keep down the meetings is to have meetings at the ranch, an hour from Stanford on the coast, but that hasn’t helped.)

So I’ve come up with is a method to sort out who I take meetings with.

### What Are You offering?

I'm not an investor, and I'm really not looking for meetings with entrepreneurs for deal flow. I'm having these meetings because someone is asking for something from me – my time – and they think I can offer them advice.

If I'd had infinite time I'd take every one of these “can I have coffee” meetings. But I don't. So I now prioritize meetings with a new filter: Who is offering me something in return?

No, not offering me money. Not for stock. But who is offering to *teach me something I don't know*.

The meeting requests that now jump to the top of my list are the few, very smart entrepreneurs who say, “I'd like to have coffee to bounce an idea off of you and in exchange I'll tell you all about what we learned about xx.”

This offer of teaching me something changes the agenda of the meeting from a one-way, you're learning from me, to a two-way, we're learning from each other.

It has another interesting consequence for those who are asking for the meeting – it forces them to think about what is it they know and what is it they have learned – and whether they can explain it to others in a way that's both coherent and compelling.

### **Irony – it's Customer Discovery**

While this might sound like a, “how to get a meeting with Steve” post, the irony is that this “ask for a two-way meeting” is how we teach entrepreneurs to get their first customer discovery meetings. I explained the tactic in my first book, [The Four Steps to the Epiphany](#), which was just released in a hardcover second edition: Don't don't just ask for a potential customers time, instead offer to share what you've learned about a technology, market or industry.

It will increase your odds in any situation you're asking for time from very busy people – whether they are VC's, company executives or retired entrepreneurs.

### **Lessons Learned**

- Wanting to have coffee is an ask for a favor
- Offering to share knowledge is a different game
- Try it; your odds of getting a meeting will increase
- And the meetings will be more productive

---

**This article is available online at:**

<http://www.forbes.com/sites/steveblank/2013/08/06/how-to-get-meetings-with-people-too-busy-to-see-you/>