FINDING MENTORS AND BUILDING A NETWORK FROM ZERO

You don't need to know anyone important to start. Here's where to meet people and how to ask for help.

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AT A GLANCE

- A network is just **people who know what you do and want to help**. You build it one conversation at a time.
- Look for help in **three circles**: people a step ahead of you, experts in one topic, and people who could become customers or partners.
- The best way to ask for help is **specific and short**: one question, 15 minutes, and a thank-you after.

Why it matters

Many opportunities, like a first big customer, a lender who says yes, or an investor introduction, come through people. Founders without a network often think they're shut out. They're not. Every network starts with zero, and the people who help are often closer than you think.

Three circles of support

Circle	Who	How they help
A step ahead	Founders 1 to 3 years ahead of you, in any industry	Practical advice on problems they just solved
Topic experts	Accountants, lawyers, bankers, marketers, retired business owners	Answers on one specific question
Customers and partners	People who buy what you sell, and businesses that serve the same customers	Feedback, referrals and sales

Where to find people

- **Free small business programs.** In the US, Small Business Development Centers (SBDCs) and SCORE offer free advisors and workshops.

- **Community and cultural groups.** Chambers of commerce, faith communities, cultural associations and immigrant business groups.
- **Schools.** Alumni networks, entrepreneurship clubs and business school clinics.
- **Online.** Industry groups, LinkedIn and local founder communities.
- **Events.** Pitch nights, markets, workshops and meetups. Go to listen, not only to pitch.
- **Your customers.** Some of your best advisors will be people who already buy from you.

How to ask for help

1. **Be specific.** "Can I ask you how you priced your first catering contract?" works better than "Can you be my mentor?"
2. **Keep it short.** Ask for 15 to 20 minutes, on their schedule.
3. **Do your homework.** Learn about their work first.
4. **Follow up.** Send a thank-you, then tell them later what you did with their advice. People love hearing their help made a difference.
5. **Give back.** Share a useful article, make an introduction, or buy from their business.

> EXAMPLE
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> **Message that works:** "Hi Ms. Okafor, I run a small cleaning business in your area and saw you built yours to 20 employees. I'm about to make my first hire and have one question: how did you decide between an employee and a contractor? Could I buy you a coffee or call you for 15 minutes next week? Thank you, Rosa."

Turning contacts into mentors

Mentorship usually grows from a few good conversations, not from a formal ask. After two or three helpful talks, you might say, "Would you be open to a check-in every couple of months?" Keep a simple list of the people you meet, what you talked about and when to follow up.

> WATCH OUT
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> Be careful with anyone who offers to "connect you to funding" for an upfront fee. Real mentors and advisors don't charge founders to make introductions. See **R-23 Red Flags and Funding Scams to Avoid**.

Common mistakes

- **Only asking for things.** Build relationships before you need them, and give help too.
- **Asking vague questions.** "Pick your brain" requests are easy to ignore. Be specific.
- **Not following up.** Most people never send the thank-you. Doing it makes you memorable.
- **Waiting until you're "ready."** Start talking to people now, at any stage.

Your checklist

- ☐ List 10 people you already know who could help, even a little
- ☐ Find one free advisor program near you, like an SBDC or SCORE
- ☐ Go to one event this month to listen and meet two people
- ☐ Send one specific, short request for advice
- ☐ Start a simple contact list with follow-up dates

Key words, explained

Word	What it means
Mentor	Someone more experienced who gives advice over time.
Advisor	Someone who helps on a specific topic, sometimes formally.
Warm introduction	When someone who knows both people connects them.
SBDC	Small Business Development Center, a free US advising program.

Where to go next

- **S-09 Pacing Yourself: Building Without Burning Out**
- **UD-01 How Project Underdogs Works**
- **R-10 Angel Investors**

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