
When It Comes to Introductions, It's the Journey, Not Just the Destination



By [Nadav Klein](#) , INSEAD, and [Rachel Eva Lim](#) , INSEAD Knowledge

Including information about your career journey can help convey warmth in written professional introductions.

Be it through cover letters or get-to-know-you emails, professionals often introduce and promote themselves through written communications, which offer one of the most basic opportunities to shape impressions. LinkedIn data reveal that about [122 million people](#) have been granted interviews through the largely text-based networking site, with [eight people](#) hired via the platform every minute.

No doubt everyone wants to be seen in a positive light, but what do people care about when they evaluate us in a professional context? [Existing research](#) suggests that they consider two things: First, whether we are likeable and have good intentions, and second, whether we can achieve goals.

In academic research, the first dimension is known as “warmth” and the second dimension is known as “competence”. People tend to make warmth judgements about others before they make competence judgements. In other words, they decide if they like us before determining whether we are competent.

Given that warmth is a key factor in forming impressions, my co-authors* and I (Nadav Klein) carried out a series of experiments to gain a better understanding of how self-promotion affects warmth and competence perceptions, and how professionals can improve the effectiveness of their written introductions.

Consider the journey

In professional introductions, written or otherwise, individuals are typically encouraged to engage in self-promotion and draw attention to their accomplishments to impress their audience. By focusing on outcomes, such as the milestones they have achieved, people can display their competence and highlight their ability to fulfil their career ambitions.

However, many self-promotion tactics, such as self-praise or flattery, can backfire and make someone appear less warm. This is because promoting oneself clashes with norms of humility, and people don’t like immodest others. Compounding the problem, it can be harder to convey interpersonal warmth via a written introduction compared to face-to-face interactions or richer forms of communication like video and voice calls.

In **our research**, recently published in *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, we hypothesised that individuals could convey warmth in written professional introductions by applying the Mark Twain adage: “Success is a journey, not a destination.”

Journeys refer to the path someone takes to attain their career outcomes. These narratives contain information that can include a determination to learn, difficulties in progressing towards an outcome, the practice and acquisition of skills, and the growth or development that occurs on the road to achievement.

We predicted that journey information would help convey warmth as it mitigates perceptions of arrogance associated with self-promotion. In fact, it could help individuals convey humility by signalling that they possess self-

knowledge, in that they can reflect on past decisions, obstacles and forks in their road to success.

To gauge this, we conducted a series of experiments, beginning with four pilot studies in a real-world context. Across these pilot studies, we found that more journey-oriented LinkedIn introductions increased warmth perceptions, partly because these individuals were perceived as humbler. The results extended beyond untrained or inexperienced evaluators to HR specialists who are well-versed in making hiring decisions.

Of interest, we observed this effect in the finance industry. The sector is known for focusing self-promotion strategies on outcomes, and the general standard is to publicise one's accomplishments to gain credibility. This suggests that even when professional norms encourage the sharing of achievements, journey information – which could be a refreshing change for observers – helps convey warmth.

In subsequent experiments, we found that including journey information was particularly helpful in conveying perceptions of humility and warmth when an individual's journey was deemed of average or high difficulty. We also found that including journey information increased perceived warmth in written introductions, but not video introductions. The latter are characterised by richer nonverbal cues that convey warmth in and of themselves.

Better together

Our experiments consistently indicated that introductions that include journey information are more likely to produce higher perceptions of warmth above and beyond any warmth effects that outcome information may provide. In fact, in some studies, we found that outcome information reduced warmth perceptions.

Our results may raise the question of whether journey-based introductions are “better” than outcome-based ones and, if so, in what sense. We do not dispute the importance of communicating accomplishments to display competence. Instead, we believe these two types of information are complementary instead of contradictory – with journey information providing richness and context for outcome information. In other words, their relationship is not one of “better than” but rather one of “better together”.

In two of the studies, we found that adding journey information led to a greater desire for audiences to connect with introducers. Thus, professionals who include journey information in their introductions may not only create more positive impressions, but also increase their likelihood of forming meaningful connections between themselves and their peers.

Advice for professionals

A straightforward implication of our findings is that when people want to exhibit warmth in text-based interactions, adding information about their professional journey is likely to be helpful. They may also want to consider additional elements that could help with warmth perceptions, such as humour.

In addition, past research has highlighted the [difficulty of building rapport](#) in written interactions and the [inefficacy of text-based interactions](#) for creating feelings of social connection. The benefits of including journey information may therefore extend beyond creating positive initial impressions to other contexts.

Another benefit is that people are prompted to reflect on their career – such as why they chose the jobs they did, why they entered a specific industry, etc. – as they ponder how to frame their journey for observers. This is something that many professionals may not necessarily think about often, and it can help individuals arrive at a deeper understanding of their career journey thus far.

When deciding whether to include journey information, a pragmatic consideration is if doing so would make introductions unacceptably long. We must convey information succinctly as our audience has limited time and attention. Moreover, it is important to not dwell on the process without revealing the outcome. We want to give our audience the sense that a journey has a purpose and a destination.

Everyone has a journey, a travelogue that accounts for the development of their careers until the present. Our research suggests that others would enjoy reading about it. What's more, it enables us to partially solve the challenge of promoting ourselves with humility.

*[Kelly A. Nault](#), IE Business School and [Övül Sezer](#), Cornell University.

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/career/when-it-comes-introductions-its-journey-not-just-destination>

About the author(s)

Nadav Klein is an Assistant Professor of Organisational Behaviour at INSEAD.

Rachel Eva Lim is a Senior Editor at INSEAD Knowledge.

About the research

"It's the journey, not just the destination: Conveying interpersonal warmth in written introductions" is published in *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*.