

INTERVIEWING, POSITIONING YOURSELF TO GET THE OFFER *by Hank Rennar*

It is important to understand that every interview, sales presentation or executive board meeting is fundamentally structured the same way. In most corporate meetings, as well as interviews, the participants usually engage in the following process: establish credibility, identify the objective or desired outcome, consider and evaluate options and solutions, evaluate potential shortcomings and concerns, consider ways to resolve concerns and, finally, implement a solution or plan of action.

If you've ever studied the strategies of selling, you probably recognize a similar pattern in the steps of the sales process: build rapport, identify needs and desired outcome, address the needs, probe for objections, overcome objections, trial close and finally ... close the sale. Although a board meeting, sales presentation and an employment interview may seem like three totally different scenarios, they are very much the same. In each situation, individuals are attempting to influence others to achieve a desired outcome.

To successfully influence, motivate or sell a concept, it is necessary to follow the basic sales process. To properly position yourself in the interview, you must engage the interviewer's mind and heart by uncovering his or her needs and identifying "hot buttons." Successfully addressing the interviewer's hot buttons puts you that much closer to getting an offer, or, in sales terminology, "closing the deal." Before you engage the interviewer, however, you must be properly prepared.

Preparation requires several steps. First, build rapport and become familiar with the company you are interviewing with. Although knowing the composition of corporate assets, amount of debt, approximate size of the organization and other statistical data is important, it is equally important to understand the corporate vision, history, culture, values and how the company measures success.

In other words, you need to know where the company is today in its market, where it came from, how it got there and where it wants to be in the future. You can usually glean most of this information from the company Web site, corporate brochures, annual reports and investor relations. Additionally, Dun and Bradstreet and Hoover's are great sources for company information.

Secondly, it is important to know your resume, your career history and be able to tell your story. This will establish credibility. You should be able to verbalize where you've been, how you got there and where you want to be down the road. Get comfortable with elaborating on your achievements, as well as challenges, and how you were able to overcome adversity. Role-play as if you were in an actual interview. Practice until you are comfortable answering specific questions regarding why you left a particular company, industry changes or specific changes in job focus.

There should be a smooth transition from one leg of a career to the next, and it should reflect sound judgment and continuous career progression. This is where a professional recruiter or coach can be invaluable.

The third and probably most important step is to create interview questions that identify and address needs. I can't tell you the number of times a CEO or key hiring authority has said to me, "Your client asked all the right questions, and we would like to make an offer." Your questions, though subtle, send a message that's loud and clear.

Each question tells the interviewer something about you. The questions you ask--and those you don't ask--signal your motivation, experience, polish, education, agenda, ethics, values, attributes, work habits, strengths and weaknesses. So, consider carefully what you wish to say about yourself when composing your questions.

Your questions should be open-ended, to encourage and stimulate conversation. This allows you develop chemistry and connect with the interviewer, which is the key to getting to the next step of the process and to ultimately getting the offer.

Good open-ended questions tend to keep the interview flowing smoothly, like a waltz. A good interview is like two people dancing: one usually leads, but together they complement one another. If done correctly, you can't tell who is leading whom.

Interview questions should accomplish two things. First, they should express your desire to understand what the company wants to achieve. Second, they should indicate your desire to help them reach those objectives. In the early stages of the interview, it is critical to build rapport and establish your value. This is done by finding out what their hot buttons are. An example of a good probing question would go like this: "Specifically, Mr. CEO, what could I do in my first year as your CFO that would exceed your expectations and meet our corporate objectives?"

Notice the question is not "me"-oriented. "Me" questions will always get you in trouble if asked at the wrong time. You don't ask dad for the keys to the car right after you see the "F" on your report card. On the other hand, you could probably get the car and even some spending money if you ask him right after you paint the house and mow the lawn. As the old saying goes, timing is everything.

In the beginning of the interview process, stay away from "me" questions. It's not about what's in it for you; it's about what's in it for them.

The next step of the interview, and probably the most difficult, is the trial close. This will usually uncover concerns or objections that need to be addressed before closing the interview. Many individuals fail at this juncture because they are afraid to ask the defining question: "What concerns do you have regarding my ability to be an effective member of your team?"

Obviously, this question places you in a somewhat vulnerable position. But, if you don't address it, you have no way of knowing if there is a perceived objection, or even where you stand with the interviewer. An objection in the interviewer's mind is like a brick wall you can't get through.

Even if a perceived shortcoming is not valid, it will inhibit you from going forward. Therefore, you must get the interviewer to disclose any concerns or objections he or she may have regarding your qualifications. Once all objections have been addressed and the interviewer is satisfied, you can move to the final step

The close requires a very direct question that reflects confidence and demonstrates your interest in going forward. Examples of effective closing questions are: "What is our next step?" or "Who else would you like me to meet with?" Although these questions may seem simple, you'd be surprised at how many individuals fail to close the interview, resulting in an awkward ending to what could have been a successful meeting. The closing question is not only direct, but requires a response that establishes momentum.

Any response from the interviewer other than, "We would like you to meet the rest of the team" or "we would like to go to the next step" could be an indication that there are still concerns or issues you may need to address. It is important that you validate this response, by asking for reassurance of their interest in going forward.

If you still sense other concerns, don't be afraid to ask for clarification and proceed to probe further. Remember, you have nothing to lose and everything to gain. Persistence never lost an opportunity.

Interviewing is an art, and the best candidates don't always get hired. But if you hone your skills, do your homework and implement these interview strategies, you increase your odds of getting the offer.

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* An interview is a lot like a sales presentation or a board meeting, in that it involves trying to influence others to achieve a certain outcome.

* Preparation is critical, and involves both researching the company and trying to get a sense of its current position and its corporate culture.

* The questions that you ask send important signals about everything from your background and skills to your strengths, work habits and potential.

* It's vital to uncover any perceived objections or questions and be able to explain them. Be prepared then to "close the deal" and seek information about the next steps.

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