

Interview techniques: First impressions

Follow our advice and stay confident about your preparation and ability to impress your interviewer.

So, you've finally made it to the interview. Hopefully you've prepared adequately and can tackle even the most challenging and battle-hardy interviewer. Remaining confident about your preparation and ability to impress the interviewer is important. The last thing you want is to get nervous and fall to pieces.

First Impressions

Although a professional interviewer will strive to get a thorough idea of your skills and personality before making a judgement, the reality is that almost everyone makes an initial opinion of a stranger within the first five minutes of meeting them.

From the moment you enter the building, you should think of yourself as a potential employee. Be polite to everyone you meet from the receptionist onwards because it's possible that anyone you meet could be asked whether or not they liked you!

The best advice is to try to remain calm and confident with a firm (but not wrist-crushing) handshake, remembering to make eye contact. Putting the interviewer at ease by being down to earth while remaining businesslike always gets you off to a good start. Sometimes it's a good idea to have a few conversation openers handy, such as commenting favourably on the premises, to help break the silence.

Before you sit down

It's a good idea to ask for a glass of water - you're going to be doing a lot of talking. Make sure you're seated comfortably in a position where you can easily address all the interviewers. Above all make sure you remember the names of your interviewers; this means paying particular attention to them when you are first introduced, and taking note of their various roles.

The first few minutes

According to research, employers' impressions are made in the following way:

- Body language and image (70%)
- Tone of voice (20%)
- What you say (10%)

The way you walk into a room and sit down is very crucial as it can set the tone for the entire interview. If you make a bad start it can be an uphill struggle to recover lost ground. So try to avoid slouching, or sitting defensively with your arms and legs crossed.

A well-trained interviewer will usually break the ice by opening the interview with a few vague questions such as "Did you find the place okay?" etc. Sit back and allow them to direct the course of the interview and don't be too anxious to prove yourself right away. Remember your preparation and wait for the ideal moments to impress upon them your key selling points.

Profiles

As we mentioned in the preparation section, it's a good idea to create a profile of your unique selling points. You cannot dictate what sort of questions you will be asked, but you can repeatedly weave these details into your answers. You should try to have two clear profiles, a personal profile and a business profile. Here are two examples.

Personal Profile: I am an ambitious, organised and highly-motivated individual who is goal driven and excels at building long-term customer relationships. My ability to manage people is shown by winning the national sales manager's award for outstanding team performance. Occasionally I am intolerant of incompetence. After hours I enjoy fitness and recreational volleyball.

Business Profile: I am an experienced sales professional with five years specific experience in the automotive industry, specialising in corporate fleets. I have the ability to diversify into LDVs and commercial vehicle sales, with strong product knowledge, and a particularly good understanding of market trends, and competitors. I am also confident that I can direct a regional team.

Dos and don'ts during the interview

It's impossible to predict the course of the discussion, but there are some fundamentals to be aware of at all times.

- Always adopt a professional and business-like manner.
- Listen intently.
- Use strong positive language.
- Be honest, but be prepared to 'bend' the truth if it suits the situation and you can get away with it.
- Ask relevant questions.
- Wear a smile at all times.
- Never indicate that you're desperate for a job.
- Don't get into discussions about your personal life, and decline any bait to mention secrets of your present employer; the interviewer should respect your trustworthiness and integrity.
- Ensure that you don't smell of any strong odours, e.g. alcohol, garlic or even perfume.
- Don't fidget or play with your hair, clothing, items in your pockets etc.
- Avoid negative phrases such as: "I don't know" and "I'm not sure".
- Be persuasive: speak in terms of what benefit you can bring to the company, rather than the other way around.
- Remain calm and don't rush your answers.

Additional techniques

Strengthening your case with a presentation or portfolio may be a good idea, particularly if it is a creative job vacancy. But unless doing a presentation is a required part of the interview, do check that this is agreeable to the interviewer.

A visual presentation can make a far stronger impression than verbal description, it shows beyond doubt what you can produce, and adds a more informal and interesting aspect to the interview. Microsoft PowerPoint is the most widely used and dynamic program available, and it's worth spending a hour or two putting together a dozen slides which outline (in point form) your ideas, your previous successes (with examples), and attributes which you could bring to the company. If you're a web designer, for instance, then ask for an internet connection so that you can show examples of your work.

It's usually better to make the presentation at the beginning of the interview, but let them give you a description of the job first. Above all, the effort you've taken will show your enthusiasm. Here are a few tips to remember when using PowerPoint:

- Use 'white space' liberally.
- Avoid cluttering the page with long sentences or too much detail (three to four points is ideal).
- Try not to use more than 10 slides.
- Check spelling and facts thoroughly
- Use your own laptop, and create a shortcut on the desktop page to avoid any confusion.
- Avoid too much animation and trickery, and use the 'mouse-click' transition, so you can proceed at the interviewer's pace.
- Alternatively, when saving onto a disk use the 'pack and go' function (file menu) to compress the presentation onto one disk, and make a copy which runs on PowerPoint 95, just in case!