

Interview Small Talk Makes a Big Impression

By Sinara Stull O'Donnell

"Oh, I notice you went to Whittier College. So did I."

"You were at Disney for two years? I worked for Disney, too."

"Toastmasters? I'm in Toastmasters, too."

All of the above are opening gambits that I've used while interviewing candidates. They often were greeted with an "uh huh" while the interviewee waited for a "real" question. As an executive recruiter, I always tried to engage candidates in a conversation to make interviews more comfortable. Over the years, I noticed that most interviewees were so focused on the task of selling themselves in an interview they forgot they were dealing with a person. They couldn't put themselves in the shoes of the interviewer. This lack of imagination is also evident at meetings and conferences where the "me focused" push their own networking needs and fail to ask about the other person. While interviewing and job networking during an economic downturn, it's important to stand out, not as just a good potential employee, but as a team player. There are four areas that are often forgotten in the "heat of the interview:"

1. Empathy. Recruiters review literally thousands of resumes and may interview a hundred candidates in a week. Sometimes, their meetings become rote. Luckily, some interviewers try to make the situation more fun by introducing interesting conversational topics. If you're fortunate enough to receive a conversational bone such as "I'm a Toastmaster, too," jump on it. Most job seekers go to as many meetings as they can in search of job opportunities. As the recipient of piranha-like questioning about jobs at my past employers, I've felt like screaming. There is a fine line between assertiveness and desperation. Consider how your listener hears you. When making contacts while networking, think of long-term benefits, not short-term results.

2. Common courtesy. I remember being startled when an interviewee once leaned over and said, "It must be hard to interview people all day and have me come in at 4 p.m." He was right. I was blurry with exhaustion, but his comment made me realize why I'd gotten into recruiting in the first place -- the people. This gentleman, and that's truly the word for him, asked how long I'd worked for the company, how I got into recruiting and why I stayed in it. In an hour-long meeting, we spent about five minutes on me. I realized later that he'd also picked up a lot of information about his audience and my company along the way. As an interviewer, I've often felt dehumanized by candidates. It seemed as though they viewed me merely as a conduit to the company. I usually remembered in a positive way

those candidates who asked how long I had been with the company and where I felt the company was going and responded to my conversational overtures. I could "see" them on board, working.

3. That it's an interview, not an interrogation. There's nothing more frustrating for a recruiter than to be faced with a candidate who answers as though he or she is being interrogated by the FBI. "Yes" and "no" aren't satisfactory answers. As a professional speaker, I use a technique called "the string of pearls." Basically, it means connecting one thought to another. You may want to try this technique during interviews. Here's an example of how you would converse:

Interviewer: "...and so that's the history of the company. We're expanding in the next few years, but you can see where we've come from."

Candidate: "That's very interesting. I'd read about the company on the Web, but you've put its history in perspective for me. How long have you been here?"

Interviewer: "I've been here about two years."

Candidate: "Oh. What changes have you seen since you came on board?"

4. Interest. Let's face it, some interviewers are terrible. As a job hunter, I've had my share. One interviewer said to me, "I can't get a handle on you." Another said he'd been told to interview me and so he "might as well." Even seasoned recruiters can question by rote, especially if they're getting little response. Some of the best interviewees are those who show more than a passing interest in the company, the job and their future. These job seekers show that they're looking at the big picture, not just a mirror. They'll often say things like:

- "May I follow up on that question a little to clarify?"
- "I have a few questions about the job; when would it be appropriate for me to ask them?"
- "I have over 10 years in succession planning with high-level executives. What level would I be working with in this job?" This question has the added advantage of helping the interviewer visualize you in the job.

Most of all, remember to see the interviewer as a person, not just a company representative. It *isn't* just about you.

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