

By Calvin Sun

Given the current economy, maintaining contacts with other companies can be critical. Knowing the right people can help you land a better job, one with more pay or perhaps the chance of advancement. But getting that next job, of course, often involves an interview. Here are some tips to help you excel.

1 Be on time

Give yourself enough time to reach your destination, especially if you're unfamiliar with the area. You will have enough stress with respect to the actual interview. Don't add to it by complicating your travel to there. Consider a dry run prior to interview day, especially if you're driving. Remember that mapping and navigational services could take you (as they did me) through an empty field or the wrong way on a one-way street.

Don't get there too early, either. Doing so makes you look as though you have no other job and could hurt you later during salary negotiations. Plan to arrive between 10 to 20 minutes before your time. If you really do get there on the early side, consider joking with the receptionist or your interviewer about your surprise or "anger" over the lack of traffic. Then get serious and say that all you need is a place to sit down, because you have work you can do while you wait.

2 Occupy yourself while waiting

Do bring work with you, so you can do it. There's always another e-mail or memo to write, or a chance to review your to-do list or project plan. You even could start on the thank-you note to your interviewer(s). (See below.)

Whatever you do, don't look up every time someone passes by. Doing so makes you look weak and anxious.

3 Research the company

Don't worry if people call you a creeper or a stalker because you're researching the company. My daughters call me that all the time, but I don't let it stop me. Take time to find out about challenges and problems that company is facing. The simplest method is simply to do a Google search. If the company is publicly traded, you can get additional information from financial sites, such as finance.yahoo.com or money.com.

4 Dress the part

When in doubt, dress more conservatively than less. However, don't go too far, even on the "up" side, because your interviewer might think you are out of touch. The best approach is to find out how people (in particular, the people one level above you) dress, and to follow accordingly.

If dressing that way is noticeably different from how you and your current co-workers dress, you might have a problem. Dressing differently the day of your interview might telegraph your intentions to others, something you may or may not want. If it's the latter, consider leaving your interview clothing in your car or some other area. If you're a male, maybe you can appear at your current job without a tie, then put one on, along with a sport jacket, when you go for your interview.

5 Tie your answers to issues the company/interviewer is facing

Once you have background information on the company and any problems it's facing, try to tie that information to work you've done. If you can come up with solutions based on work you've already done, you may make a great impression. You will have shown resourcefulness and initiative in doing research, then demonstrated the value you can bring to the company.

Whenever you can, quantify your accomplishments. Don't just say, "I wrote a program that streamlined our inventory process." Say, if you can, "My program increased inventory turnover by 15%."

6 Be courteous to support staff

A measure of a person's character, it is said, is the way that person treats those who have no effect on the person's future. It's easy to be courteous and respectful to the interviewer or the interviewer's boss. What about that receptionist, or assistant, or server (if your interview occurs at a restaurant)? Treating them with equal courtesy speaks well of you, and in fact could be something the company is observing. Disagree with me if you want, but acting like a boor to support staff could hurt your chances.

7 Be energetic but not desperate

There's a fine line between being energetic and being desperate. Show that you're interested in the job, but don't be so interested that the interviewer thinks that this interview is your only one -- even if it is. On the other hand, being "coy" can be a good approach, because if the interviewer likes you, he or she might do more to attract you to that company. However, being *too* coy might come across as aloofness and turn off the interviewer.

The best approach is to have a restrained enthusiasm. Even better, take your cues from the interviewer. If that person is quiet and reserved, you might want to adopt if you can that demeanor. If he or she is more outgoing, you could consider emulating that manner.

8 Don't badmouth current/former employer

Speaking ill of a former employer, no matter how bad your relationship, could come back to haunt you. Even if the interviewer asks you what you disliked about your former boss, refuse to take the bait. You can speak about things you learned, even if the context is different from what the interviewer might be thinking.

Let's say your former boss publicly humiliated subordinates, and that his doing so damaged morale. You could say, for example, "I learned a lot from my former boss about how to motivate people." Did your boss often fail to keep commitments? You could say, "I learned from my boss about the importance of keeping commitments, because breaking them hurts a project and damages one's reputation."

9 Be clear on the next step(s)

Before you leave, get a sense of what will happen next. Will they make a decision? If so, when? Will they ask you to return for more interviews? Who should call whom? By knowing this information, you can get an idea of what to expect and can prepare accordingly.

10 Send a thank-you note afterward

After the interview, take the time and send a "real" (not electronic) note to your interviewer. I know it's means more time, expense and trouble than an e-mail, but sending a note can make you stand out from any competition you might have. In that note, re-emphasize the points you made, plus any others that might have occurred since that time.

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