

Interview Strategies

All successful sales people develop personal presentations which require a great deal of preparation. Likewise, the successful interview is not something that "just happens;" it also is the result of thorough preparation. Preparing for the interview can be broken down into three main areas:

- I. Knowing yourself;
- II. Knowing the interview process;
- III. Knowing the firm or agency.

I. Know Yourself

Good salespersons know their product. They know what it can do, how much it costs, and how it stacks up against the competition. It is essential for you to know these same kinds of things about yourself. Basically, you are presenting yourself as a product and attempting to convince the firm or agency to purchase (hire) you.

Be ready to discuss in depth your college and law school experiences. Ask yourself what knowledge, skills and abilities you gained through these classes. Also consider co-curricular activities in which you participated which could demonstrate your leadership potential, your ability to work with people and your ability to maintain grades while involved in other activities.

Be ready to discuss in depth prior work experience. Again, ask yourself what knowledge, skills and abilities you gained through these experiences and how they might relate specifically to the job for which you are applying.

Knowing yourself also involves knowing what you want to do. The interviewer will have a clear idea of what s/he is looking for and you should have the same clear idea of what you are looking for in a job and in a career.

II. Know The Interview Process

During the interview, you will be expected to respond to questions concerning your academic background, goals, objectives and employment history. The interviewer will be sizing you up in terms of your appearance, self confidence, communication skills, level of confidence and skills. The interview itself can be divided into three parts:

- A) Introduction
- B) Dialogue
- C) Closing

A. Introduction. The introduction may last only a few seconds. In some ways, however, it can be the most critical portion of the interview. The initial impression that you make during the introduction will dominate the entire interview. Special attention should be given to your dress, your handshake, your smile and eye contact.

B. Dialogue. The dialogue takes up the greatest amount of time and is the period during which the

interviewer learns about you and you learn about the job. The recruiter will ask several questions concerning your skills, experiences, goals and objectives. (Please refer to the attached list of "Frequently Asked Interview Questions" for specific examples.) Remember the bottom line question is "What can this person do for my firm?" Try to answer the questions in a way that demonstrates your potential in this regard.

During the dialogue portion of the interview, you will also have the opportunity to ask the interviewer questions. (Please refer to the attached list of "Questions To Ask The Interviewer" for specific examples.) Avoid asking questions that are answered at the firm's web site or in the firm résumé or literature. Also, never ask questions that are purely self-centered, such as "What is the salary?" or "What are the fringe benefits?" This kind of information, in general, is provided at a second interview, during negotiations, or another appropriate time.

C. Closing. After the dialogue, the interviewer will begin to close the interview. During this period, the interviewer may thank you for your time and give you a date when the firm will be in contact with you regarding your status as a candidate. At this time, you should feel free to express your positive feelings regarding the position and the firm. If you want the job, tell the interviewer. An interviewer is often more inclined to make a positive recommendation concerning an applicant if s/he thinks the applicant will accept the position. Be sure to shake the interviewer's hand and thank him/her for the time. If the interviewer has not given any indication as to when a decision will be made concerning the position-ASK! Maintain good eye contact and a positive attitude during the entire interview process.

There are several different types of interviews depending on the employment situation and the interviewer. There are five types of interviews:

1. First Interview
2. Second Interview
3. Group Interview
4. Lunch Interview
5. Stress Interview.

1. First Interview. This is usually with a personnel representative or is an on-campus interview. It is of short duration and is the initial screening device. If you don't make a good impression in this first interview, you won't get to any subsequent interviews. There is not enough time in the first interview to get into much detail about the position, the employer, or about you. The decision to proceed with you is based on your presentation, your appearance and your style.

2. Second Interview. The second interview is the result of a favorable response to the first interview. Sometime after the first contact, you may be invited to have a second interview. This session is of much longer duration than the first interview. In the second interview, the personnel representative will introduce you to the other people within the organization who will make the final decision about hiring. The second interview will occur within the employer's facilities and will most likely be with supervisors, partners, associates or hiring partners.

By the second interview your qualifications are generally known. What is to be determined in the second interview is whether or not you will fit in with their philosophy, style and position. They are

interested in ascertaining your ambitions, motivations and career goals. You will have the opportunity to elaborate on your skills as they relate to the position.

3. Group Interview. This is where people who will be involved in the decision to hire will meet with you as a group. This is a little more difficult than the individual interview since it is tough to get to know people in the group and be comfortable with them. Group interviews are also difficult because you will be inundated with questions from all directions reflective of issues important to each of the individuals within the group.

Occasionally, an employer will interview a group of candidates at one time. This is especially useful in relaying information about the organization and the position. It is often followed by a short individual interview. Caution should be exercised in participating in this type of group interview. It may appear to be more casual; however, the employer is already making some conclusions about candidates by their appearance, questions and attentiveness as a member of the group.

4. Lunch Interview. A lunch interview is generally conducted during a second interview. You will most likely be scheduled for a lunch interview with a new associate - someone with whom you have something in common. If there is an alum at the firm, you may be scheduled to have lunch with that person. Generally, the intent of a lunch interview is to put you in a social situation to see how you act and to put you in a “comfortable” situation in an attempt to get you to open up and be more “yourself.” Remember, a lunch interview is just that - an interview. You should allow yourself to be a little more casual during a lunch interview, but remember you are being interviewed. Never reveal anything to the interviewer that you wouldn’t reveal in a more typical interview. Your table manners will also be judged during the lunch interview.

5. Stress Interview. Some positions demand that candidates be able to react well under stress and, therefore, employers may conduct a high tension interview to evaluate a person's reactions under stress. Other times, it occurs because the character of the employer is such to create high tension. It is very difficult to prepare for a stress interview. The best advice is to remain as calm as possible and attempt to give the same answers as you would for any type of interview - those which show your qualifications for the position. Fortunately, this type of interview occurs very seldom.

III. Know The Firm

Preparing for an interview should involve researching the firm. Annual reports, faculty, friends, alumni, employer brochures and résumés, NALP forms, Assistant Deans (such as Martindale-Hubbell) and present employees can all be utilized in order to obtain information about the employer. Candidates with information obtained from these resources can develop a presentation that will interweave their background and interests into what the employer has to offer. You can show interest in the firm by mentioning items which were discussed in firm literature or by asking more detailed questions concerning these items.

Interview Dos and Don'ts

DO

- Practice interviewing in advance; attend workshops, practice with a friend, or practice in front of a mirror.
- Anticipate your problem areas and prepare answers that overcome them with positive information.
- Be well dressed from head to toe. Dress conservatively; limit jewelry, perfume, or after shave.
- Get to the interview early.
- Take a notepad, extra copies of your résumé, reference list, writing sample and transcript.
- Be as positive as possible in everything you say but do not lie.
- Maintain good eye contact.
- Smile.
- Think about what you say before you say it. There's nothing wrong with a moment of silence to collect your thoughts and find the right answer.
- Don't be afraid to ask the interviewer to repeat the question if you need clarification.
- Be complete in your answers; do not ramble or be too brief.
- Be assertive but not abrupt; state your accomplishments but always mention teamwork too.
- Watch for nonverbal clues from the interviewer.
- Know the correct pronunciation of the interviewer's name and mention it during the interview.
- Even if the interviewer is an alum and friendly and informal, maintain a professional attitude.
- Be yourself.
- Remember that the interview is a two way street; you are there to check out the firm to see if you want to work there; bring questions with you.

DON'T

- Don't smoke at least ½ hour before the interview; it lingers on your clothes. Do not smoke or chew gum during the interview.
- Don't say anything negative about anyone or anything; this includes classes, faculty, bosses, etc.
- Don't ask questions about salary, fringe benefits or items which would have been in literature.
- Don't call the interviewer by his or her first name.
- Don't be late for the interview.

Frequently Asked Interview Questions

Academic

1. Tell me about your undergraduate work and activities.
2. Why did you choose SIU School of Law over other universities?
3. What is your grade point average?
4. Explain your academic grade performance levels.
5. Tell me about the courses you've taken in law school.
6. What was your favorite course? Why?
7. What was your least favorite course? Why?
8. What has been the most meaningful part of your education?
9. How did your undergraduate major prepare you for a career in law?
10. Who in the law school would be best qualified to appraise your legal abilities?
11. How do you feel about practical (clinical) education?

Career

1. Why did you choose law?
2. What one person has had the most impact in your decision to go into law?
3. What is your motivation in pursuing law?
4. Tell me about your work experience.
5. What are your short- and long-range career goals?
6. What are the most important rewards you expect in your career as a lawyer?
7. Have you identified an area of legal specialization?
8. What other work experiences have you had that might contribute to your work in law?
9. How did you become interested in our firm?
10. What do you know about our firm?
11. What appeals to you about our work?
12. Why should we hire you?
13. What qualities do you possess that would make this firm a good match for you?
14. How would others describe you in the work setting?
15. Is there anything about yourself that I should know that would help me make a decision about you?
16. What did you learn from your previous jobs?
17. Would you prefer to work on one case for an entire year or on twelve cases during the same period?

Personal Attributes

1. Tell me something about yourself.
2. What are your strengths? Weaknesses?
3. How would others describe you?
4. What do you do in your non-academic hours?
5. How do you handle pressure?
6. In what extracurricular activities have you participated?
7. What motivates you to put forth your greatest effort?
8. What would you consider your greatest accomplishment?
9. What would you consider your greatest disappointment?
10. What is unique about yourself?
11. How have you demonstrated leadership ability?

Additional Questions: (The Tough Ones!)

1. Describe your decision making process.

2. Describe a group project. Who emerged as the leader? Why? How were group conflicts dealt with?
3. How well do you think Southern Illinois University School of Law is preparing you for your law degree?
4. What non-law book have you read recently? Tell me about it.
5. How do you define success?
6. What kind of boss do you prefer?
7. What do you think of your last employer?
8. Tell me why you think the lifestyle of this job is right for you.
9. How competitive are you? Will you fight to get ahead?
10. What qualities should a successful lawyer possess?

Questions to Ask the Interviewer

1. Would you describe the firm's training program that is available for a newly hired lawyer?
2. If I am hired, how will my performance be evaluated?
3. What kinds of qualities are you looking for in a newly hired lawyer in your firm?
4. What kinds of legal experiences might I expect working in your firm?
5. What is the annual turnover within this firm?
6. Why might people leave this position?
7. Where might I expect myself to be within the firm five to ten years from now?
8. How are decisions made within the firm?
9. How active are firm members in the bar association?
10. Is attendance of continuing legal education programs encouraged and do other members attend such programs?
11. What library resources are available to members?
12. What computer resources are available to members?
13. What is the partnership structure of the firm?
14. What is the criteria for partnership?
15. What are the duties and responsibilities of a junior partner?
16. What is the expected level of billable hours?
17. Is there a pro bono policy?
18. What made you decide to join the firm?
20. How soon can a new associate expect to get direct client contact and substantial responsibility?
21. What might I expect in terms of supervision of my work?

The questions above should be asked only if they are not detailed in firm literature or on the website. You may also ask for clarification purposes or to obtain more detailed information. Make sure the interviewer knows you have read the firm's literature before asking for clarification or more detailed information. For example, you might say, "I noticed in your firm literature that you have a pro bono policy. Could you explain that policy further?" Obviously, the above questions relate to a law firm employer. There are many other employers of lawyers---many of these questions can be pertinent to them as well.

Accepting an Offer

Now that you have an offer, you need to give yourself a reasonable amount of time to think it over, review your knowledge of the employer and make sure you have all the information you need to make an intelligent decision. Make sure you follow timing guidelines set by NALP when you receive an offer (discussed during each Career Orientation and available at www.nalp.org).

Begin by evaluating: 1) your own satisfaction with the size and character of the community; 2) how pleasant the relations within the firm would be; 3) the future condition of the firm; 4) the quality of the work that would be referred to you from other members of the firm; and 5) how much freedom you would have to choose your own lifestyle.

To assist you in these evaluations, it might be helpful to find information in the following areas. Much of the information can be found in the employer's literature or web site or asked of the employer during an interview. Again, many of the questions are law firm-related, but some are applicable to any type of employer.

1. What is the firm's general character - its stability and reputation? Have there been any significant split-ups in its history?
2. What are its specialties and major areas of practice?
3. Are its clients solid and varied, with important and interesting problems?
4. Does the firm have an active international practice with substantial foreign clients and offices outside the United States?
5. Is the firm's success tied to many clients or a few? How is the firm affected by the economy?
6. Is the caliber of the firm's lawyers uniformly high, with solid and able people at all age levels and in all important legal areas?
7. Are the lawyers within the firm individuals with legal ability, judgment and standards in which you will have confidence and pride?
8. Are the lawyers within the firm individuals with whom you would enjoy working? Are their backgrounds varied enough to make the office interesting?
9. Are the organizational and administrative systems within the firm sound?
10. What is the firm's future? Is it hiring and keeping new people with good qualifications?
11. Has the number of the firm's partners and associates grown significantly in the past fifteen years?

12. What do new associates do? How is their work determined and assigned? How do the associates' work and responsibilities change over the years?
13. When does an associate become a specialist? Who decides and how?
14. What formalized training does a new associate receive?
15. Does the firm use legal assistants? What kind of projects do they handle?
16. What about compensation - initial, bonus, raises? What is the firm's general philosophy on this?
17. What emphasis is placed on getting new business and how does this affect compensation?
18. How is performance evaluated and by whom? What are the criteria for advancement?
19. Are partnership opportunities significantly affected by the economy?
20. On what basis is admission to partnership determined? Is it a "competitive" standard or a "meets-the-firm's" standard?
21. What does partnership entail - compensation, responsibilities, contribution?
22. If an associate does not become a partner, what opportunities are available?
23. What is the relationship between younger and older lawyers in the firm? What are the channels of communication? Formal or informal?
24. What are the firm's prevailing attitudes and practices on such matters as pro bono work, community and government service?
25. Does the firm have a friendly atmosphere? Is it a place where people can laugh and enjoy themselves in spite of their difficult and/or stressful work? Is there a spirit of cooperation?
26. Is the locality a good place to work and live, with cultural and recreational activities, citizen interest, and convenient, attractive residential areas with good schools?
27. To what extent is the development of new clients a prerequisite to advancement?