How to Give a Knock out Interview Performance

By Marianne Anthe

Follow these stage directions to a winning interview performance:

- The most important point to remember about an interview is that it is exactly what the word says - a viewing between the parties involved. You are there to take a look at each other. If you go into an interview with the perspective that you are an equal partner to a conversation, you will have defused 80% of your nervousness. The other 20% is useful to keep you on your toes.

- Arrive at the interview place 15 to 20 minutes before the meeting. Arriving less than 15 minutes early will make you feel rushed, and more than 15 minutes will make you look like you have nothing better to do with your day.

- If a restroom is available in the hallway before entering the office, go there. Check your clothing, makeup, hair and smile (no lunch salad between the bicuspid, please.) Use a mint or breath spray. If your hands are cold, run them under hot water. If a hallway restroom is not available, go into the office, introduce yourself to the secretary, state who you're there to meet, then ask for the restroom.

- Take off your coat in the reception area and ask where to hang it. That's one less item (along with an umbrella) to be encumbered with. Take a few minutes to look around the reception area. Glance over any company information on the tables and make mental notes to use during the interview.

- A firm, not squeezing, handshake starts your encounter with the interviewer. In a good handshake the web of skin between your thumb and forefinger meets the other person's, the palms touch and the fingers wrap around the other person's hand. For heaven's sake, do not do that fingers-only sappy thing that happens so often with women because men think a woman's hand is too fragile to grasp, or women think it's ladylike - wimpy, wimpy, wimpy. And NEVER extend your forefinger straight up the other person's wrist!

- Wait for the interviewer to indicate where you should sit, even if there are only two chairs. This is not your space, so you should wait for the invitation, the same as in a person's home.

- Make pleasant small talk - informal comments about the beautiful grounds, the innovative building design, the model airplane on the desk etc. Do not slouch in your chair, regardless of the interviewer's casual posture. It is difficult to look alert and energetic when you've slid forward into TV-watching position. Keep your "behind" touching the 90-degree angle of the seat-back and seat cushion at all times.

- Take notes and ask questions. This is perfectly acceptable; just mention that you'd like to do so, as you're pulling out your pad and pencil. Taking notes helps you to remember what was said, and is an aid to asking questions later in the discussion. Do not wait for the end of the interview to ask questions, or for the interviewer to ask if you have questions. Ask them throughout the interview when something is not clear.

- Whenever possible, you should go to an interview knowing more information about the company/organization than what you read in an advertisement. Research is the way to have intelligent questions ready.

- Be sure to have a 90-second to two-minute "pitch" ready for the inevitable "Tell me about yourself" opening line. It is usually more effective to begin with your current, or most recent position, and work backwards, than vice
versa. Give the most information about the work/position that is most relevant to the job you're interviewing for. Practice this "pitch" out loud, many times.

- Remember to smile, even if only with your lips. When companies have to decide between equally qualified candidates, the one who seems to "fit" better gets the job. And "fit" is nothing more than a code word for who they would rather spend the day working with. Most people prefer colleagues who are pleasant, rather than gloomy or somber. Do not, however, tell jokes.

- Don't ramble. Answer the question that is asked, and give relevant information. The whole truth of a situation might be book-length, but if the part that relates to the question is only four pages, that's all you need to say.

- Have examples ready that explain what you've accomplished and how it pertains to the work you're discussing. These are not job duties or responsibilities. They are measurable results, and should include numbers, percentages, dollars, or units saved, increased, reduced etc. when you were faced with a situation similar to the one the interviewer is describing. This evidence, is also a helpful frame of reference when an interviewer presents you with a hypothetical situation and asks how you would resolve it. These examples should appear in brief as accomplishments on your resume.

- Do not ask about salary, vacation, or benefits, even if you have been handed a job description with salary specified. You are there to talk about the position and how your skills and experience match the job requirements. It is your opportunity to explain what you can do for the the company, not what they can do for you.

- If the interviewer presses you to discuss salary information, say you'd rather wait until you have a full understanding of the position, its needs and challenges. If she/he says that salary information is necessary to move on in the interview process (an HR interviewing obstacle), give a 10-12-thousand dollar range, then ask if it fits in the company's range. Never show your disappointment with a low salary quote. I have seen companies come up with an additional 10K dollars for candidates they really want.

- Never leave an interview without asking the most important closing questions. Always close a first interview with a brief recap of what you understand the primary job responsibilities and challenges to be, and repeat your interest in the position. Then ask if this is a one interview process, or if more meetings are necessary.

- If it is a one-interview process, ask the interviewer if you have been clear in your comments, and if she/he has any hesitation about your suitability for the job. If so, now is your chance to clear them up. If you are assertive, you can say "Mr. Smith, I am really enthusiastic about my qualifications for this job and my fit in your organization. What else can I say to convince you that I'm the right person for this job?"

- Another firm handshake, then you're out the door. Be sure to say goodbye to the secretary, whose name you remember of course, and know how to spell. You'd be amazed at how many interviewers ask the secretary's opinion of job candidates.

- Go to your car, the restroom or wherever you can have five minutes alone. Breathe deeply several times to relax, then write down your thoughts and impressions of your meeting, and anything you need to brush up on for future interviews.

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