

Winning at Telephone Interviews

By Judith Filek—President
Impact Communications, Inc.

Almost every company today uses telephone interviews as a way to screen potential job candidates. Being successful in this initial screening is critical to moving to the next step in the hiring process. To insure your success, please consider the following tips.

Have a professional message on your recorder.

One HR interviewer shared the story of calling a candidate to set up an interview. The individual's phone message began with a recording of the Helen Reddy song, "I Am Woman Hear Me Roar." At first, the interviewer thought she had misdialed. When she called the number the second time, she was really put off and moved on to the next person on her list. Any recorded message on your cell or home phone needs to sound very professional. It is the first impression people will have of you.

Be Prepared. Do not be caught off guard. Take the time to research the companies to whom you have applied. Know what the company does and who the key executives are. Learn what the Chief Executive Officer is trying to accomplish by looking at the first ten pages of the Company's Annual Report. Carefully review their web site. Most web sites will have a section called, News Articles/ Press Releases. If they do, be sure to read the articles. Sign up for daily "Google Alerts" on the companies you have targeted. If you know people who are current or former employees, be sure to elicit their perspective.

Brainstorm potential questions and rehearse your answers. Typically, telephone interviewers are trying to learn about your experience to see if you are a good fit for their company. They have a specific list of questions that typically include:

- What made you apply for this job?
- Why do you think you would be a good candidate for the job?
- What is your experience in the industry?
- Where do you see yourself in 5 years?

- What are your strengths?
- Why did you leave your last job?

Know the answers to these questions and practice answering them out loud in front of your bathroom mirror or, better yet, with a spouse or friend. The more you get comfortable with your answers, the more confident your voice will seem over the phone.

Eliminate distractions. That means assigning a friend or family member to supervise crying children, barking dogs or ringing doorbells. This summer I conducted a teleconference from my home office. As I began, I watched a deer saunter into my flower beds and consume anything that was blooming. I had all I could do to keep from banging on my window. After that, I have conducted all teleconferences with my back to the window.

Have an upbeat, enthusiastic voice. Smile, gesture, or get up and move around while talking to the interviewer. This will help you to expel nervous energy and insure that your voice sounds strong and confident. Remember to pause and breathe at the end of each sentence or thought.

Enunciate. The interviewer will be assessing how professional and well spoken you sound by listening to your voice. Do not skip over syllables, mispronounce words or speak too quickly. Avoid slang and speaking in acronyms. Watch out for filler words, "um's," "ah's" and "you knows." These will quickly chip away at your image.

Listen carefully and answer the question succinctly. Concentrate on the question being asked. Avoid focusing on your answer until you have thoroughly understood the question. Then, be crisp. Try to answer in 45 seconds or less. Do not over-answer. You can end up "off topic."

Relate your answers to your understanding of the job. Interviewers have to make quick decisions. Try to connect the dots for them. As often as you can, relate your skills or experiences to the position they are trying to fill. Get used to saying things like "What this would mean to your company is...." How

this can help your organization grow sales is” Remember, interviewers may only have a limited understanding of certain jobs, particularly those in technical fields.

Quantify your experiences. If you have saved the company five hundred thousand dollars through your cost saving efforts in 2008, make sure to tell them. Make sure to tell them how you have expanded territories or if you have been the outstanding inside sales rep of the year.

Turn a negative into a positive. If the interviewer asks if you have experience in a particular area and you don’t, use statements that end positively. “While I don’t directly have experience in XXX, I have a strong technical background in ***. From what I read in the papers, you are moving in the direction of OOO. What really matters in making that transition is someone who knows” Obviously, you never want to lie about your skills, but sometimes you can make the interviewer reconsider when you emphasize another area of strength. If the interviewer feels what you say makes sense, the individual is likely to pass you to the next person in their hiring process.

Avoid tentative language. “I am not really sure about that.” “I probably could learn it.” “Maybe it would take me a while.” These statements do not evoke confidence. Be assertive. Answer with statements like “Most definitely, I can.”

Be friendly. Look for ways to connect. Make the person like you. Engage the individual in small talk about the weather, a sports team or a news event, but be conscious that the person only has a limited amount of time to spend with each candidate.

Ask a few questions. Having a few questions shows you are really interested in the company and desire to work there. If it hasn’t already been said, it is a good idea to ask when you can expect to learn a decision.

Say “Thank You” Don’t forget to end the conversation by saying “thank you” and by saying you are interested and have enjoyed talking to the interviewer. It’s a little thing, but if you forget to do so, it will be noticed.

Phone interviewers call many people for a single job. They are looking for candidates who stand out

and have credentials that match what is on their sheet. You must make recruiters pay attention to you by sounding confident, knowledgeable and interested. The more you have done your homework and prepared, the more likely you will be successful.

Impact Communications, Inc. consults with individuals and businesses to improve their face-to-face and over the phone communication skills. It is not what you know but how you communicate it that makes a difference. When you have to have impact, phone (847) 438-4480 or visit our web site, www.ImpactCommunicationsInc.com.