

Ace the Interview

By Kai Rambow, DTM, Accredited Speaker

The author recently surveyed and interviewed over 125 active recruiters for this article.

“How did the interview go?” Evelyn Peyton, ATM-B always asks. “Oh, it was great. Everything went perfectly. I know this job is mine,” is the typical response. And then someone else gets the job.

Peyton, a dynamic, funny speaker herself (she placed second at the World Championship of Public Speaking) is a manager with a Fortune 100 company. She explains that the candidates are absolutely qualified for the job, they know it before they go in, so they’re confident and communicate well throughout the interview. “Where they make their mistake,” Peyton notes, “is assuming they are the only perfect one for the job.”

How can you stand out from the competition, especially since there are hundreds of applicants for every position in today’s job market? These six areas identified by active recruiters may surprise you.

#1 Dress to Impress

The expression that you never get a second chance at a first impression is still true today. Dressing appropriately and/or professionally was the number one thing mentioned by the recruiters.

“When people dress up,” says Don Enschede, DTM, AS, “they are showing respect for the audience.” Enschede, who is often referred to as “The Voice of Toastmasters” for his announcement work at the international conventions, admits to being very conservative. So much so, that his Toastmasters club, Sandpiper in Ventura, California has a tradition of proper dress. That means that men are expected to wear a jacket and tie.

Enschede states, “People get bent out of shape, yet they are lacking polish and panache. When people are dressed well they feel good about themselves and show greater confidence.”

While many workplaces have gone with a business casual dress code, impressions and impact, especially during interviews hasn’t changed. When John Molloy researched his classic book, *Dress for Success*, he started with the premise that how we dress doesn’t matter. His research showed otherwise.

Not sure what to do. You can’t go wrong with classics. Enschede always wears a full suit for any speaking engagement. And Peyton cautions not to relax your dress in second or third interviews. “You need to be consistently professional,” she advises.

#2 Mind Your Manners

This is a combination of things such as being articulate, confident, polite, respectful and professional. Cheryl Austin, a former Toastmaster and club president, shares wisdom gained from her 13 years of human resources experience and 20 years of management consulting work.

Austin observes you use good judgment when you don’t wear a brand new suit, you show respect when you arrive early, and you demonstrate being professional when you

prepare anything that frees you and makes the interviewer's job easy. "Anytime you don't have to think about the little things," Austin expounds, "you free yourself to forget about yourself and be really good at observing the interviewer and what he or she needs. It's their agenda that matters."

Ken Wright, whose work over the past 25 years has included executive search, management consulting and executive coaching asks himself these questions, "Is their game on? Are they answering more than just the question? Are they confident enough to amplify or ask their own question?"

#3 Do Your Homework

Research the company. Judy Hooper, who hired 100 people last year, says it "absolutely is an advantage to know about the company. If you check out the web site, it makes a good impression that you care about the job and the company. I really like it when they are checking us out."

Austin suggests trying to identify how the company wants to be seen, "what words and phrases do they use." Austin also always digs deeper by talking to people who work there or have worked there before.

"Don't try to be an expert on their business," Wright warns, however you can ask some great questions such as, "What do you think is the company's edge is in the marketplace? Who do you see as your biggest competitors? Who are the ones who keep you up at night? What do you think the company needs to do differently?" Let them tell you, and then you'll know what skills to highlight to the interviewer.

#4 Be Positive

Expressing yourself as motivated, enthusiastic with a can do attitude are definite assets during the interview process. Since most of us are too busy trying to fight our nervousness, what can you do to at least come across better than other candidates.

Austin recommends a two prong approach by working with and rehearsing with a friend. "We all have entry behaviors when we're not quite comfortable. Have a good friend help you become self-aware. If you squirm, maybe you need to fold your hands and practice doing so. When you have lunch with a friend, you relax, drop your shoulders and it has nice ripple effect throughout your body. That's what you want to practice."

If this still doesn't come easily to you, Wright has a great suggestion. He recommends verbalizing, "Don't misinterpret my quietness as disinterest. I'm nervous, but I'm very interested in the company."

#5 Sell Yourself

Even some of the best salespeople have difficulty selling themselves. Austin has taken advantage of something all of us as Toastmasters are used to doing. She once received a standing ovation at the end of teaching a university course. That's basically unheard of. When someone paid her a general compliment at the end of a class, Austin would always ask them what was it that specifically triggered that comment. Then she would repeat it every week after.

Since we're used to getting feedback in Toastmasters, be proactive. Austin encourages people to, "ask your previous managers, 'What do I do best? What have you seen me do well? What would you say is not one of my core strengths?'"

Once you know, “instead of using I all the time, which is uncomfortable for most of us,” Austin enthuses, “you can say, ‘My previous boss . . .’ Invoking a third party is both easier and more credible.”

Wright takes it a step further. “Pick out a need in the interview, a problem you think you can solve. Talk about how you can solve it. At the end of the interview, go back and bring it up again. Assert, ‘I think I can bring that to this company. Those are reasons I want to work for you and why I think I can do the job.’”

#6 Resume

You need to be invited to the interview first. That is what your resume needs to do. Surprisingly many candidates fail to do a good job here.

Wright recommends no more than two pages. “I’m not a believer in summary statements such as, ‘experienced executive who can walk on water.’ I’m interested in what your experience says you can do. Most recruiters skip to your experience. They’re looking for the scope, depth and breadth of your responsibility. Concentrate on what you’ve done.”

Judy Hooper recruits for a software company. She notices that basics are frequently missing. “I need to know exactly what skills you have learned with your degree in computer science. If you don’t tell me you know Java, I’m not going to know.” Hooper advises to be specific in your cover letter and tweak your resume accordingly.

These are suggestions you can take as an individual. It doesn’t have to end with this article. Here are some activities your club can do to help members.

1. Use the theme of the job interview for Table Topics and then use challenging questions for club members.
2. Have an entire club meeting geared towards club members answering interview questions on camera. Then give each member his/her own copy so everyone can see how they present themselves in an interview format.
3. Invite a guest speaker, preferably an active recruiter with experience to present on any number of related topics: how to write a better resume, how to give better answers, and how to develop some great questions.

All of these are great ways to put your Toastmaster skills to work for you.

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