

selling yourself in an interview

(strategic search partners)

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From our vast experience as both professional accountants and recruiters, we can tell you that if you truly want to realize your career potential, you must have a plan. In addition to possessing the necessary education to achieve that plan, the next major step should revolve around the actual mechanics of 'selling yourself'.

Let's take a look at a study completed by Dr. Albert Mehrabian of UCLA, who suggests there are three principle elements that determine the power and effectiveness of face-to-face communication. They are 1) What We Say, 2) How We Say It and 3) How We're Perceived as We Say It. His studies have indicated 55% emphasis is placed on what we say, 38% on how we say it, and 7% on visual perception.

Putting studies and research aside, we find from our experience that more emphasis is actually placed on the perception component. We tend to attach more significance to visual perception because conventional wisdom dictates that you put your best foot forward in an interview and therefore people are a little more judgmental than they would be in other circumstances. Conversely, an interviewer tends to attach less significance on 'how we say it', because business discussions are often drier than other conversations and we therefore don't expect quite so much in the way of fluff.

What we say

The first step toward effective communication in any interview is to succinctly answer the following questions: Where were you? Where are you now? Where do you want to be? You may have started your career in public accounting, worked your way into a large public

manufacturing company, experienced gradual promotions to achieve your current controller-ship position, and now aspire to be a VP/CFO of a medium manufacturing company. Whatever the case may be, you need to define your career path clearly and concisely.

So, how do you break down your resume into mini stories that, when added together, tell the big picture? It's all about storytelling.

The first thing you need to know about storytelling is that every narrative can be categorized into three parts: the first part identifies the principal characters, sets the scene and establishes the conflict; the second part, the body of the story, explores how the protagonists deal with the conflict; and the last part resolves the conflict and tells what may happen in the future.

So what does this have to do with your career? Think of all your previous jobs using this type of narrative. Begin by describing the company you worked for, the position you were in and the specific challenges you faced. In the second part of the narrative, discuss how you actually went about doing your job and how you handled the projects and challenges you faced. In the last part, talk about what you specifically accomplished in that job and allude to why you were ready to make your next career move.

Tell these stories out loud. Get your partner or your friend to ask you interview-type questions and practice answering them using this format. Once you have the big-picture answers down pat, practice. Tell mini stories about specific challenges and projects. Practice telling these stories in a mirror. The more you practice out loud, the less you will stumble. Your answers will become more refined and precise, and ultimately, your stories will be more compelling.

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From our experience, we find that one of the biggest differences between interviewing a Controller/CFO and a professional at a more junior level is that a good Controller/CFO tells stories naturally. They anticipate what you want to know and continue telling mini stories about themselves that show the progression in their career. An interviewer will usually have to ask a lot of questions to guide a more junior candidate in the hopes of eliciting this type of information.

How we say it

Think about the best storytellers or communicators that you know. What do they have in common?

A good storyteller engages their audience. They speak clearly and make eye contact to monitor the audience's reaction and ensure they are following along. The storyteller may actually pause in the middle of the story and ask the audience if they have any questions, thus once again ensuring the audience is receiving and understanding the information. A good storyteller will also vary their intonation and pace. Stories will start off with a slower pace and tone. As the storyteller moves into the heart of the conflict, the tone and pace pick up accordingly. And for the resolution, the story returns to a slower pace and lower pitch. Modulation and animation are vital. It doesn't matter what you say, but rather how you say it. You could be reading the telephone book, but if you say it like you're reading *Gone With The Wind*, your audience will be captivated!

In addition to vocal animation, physical animation is important as well. Sit up straight, use appropriate gestures, show enthusiasm, and give the impression that you believe you have a good story to tell. If you want your audience to be interested and engaged, you need to act like you have an interesting and engaging story to tell. Also, be sure your hands are visible and in a relaxed position, as people are likely to believe someone is more trustworthy when their hands are in clear sight. However, do not cross your arms as that can often be perceived as defensive.

Visual Perception

Dressing for success is important in the interviewing process. Good packaging sells. Everyone judges by it – and if they say they don't, they're lying. Oscar Wilde once said, "It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances."

We don't want to spend too much time on grooming tips as it's quite straightforward. However, having said that, we have met a lot of people – in some cases fairly senior people – who would do well with a review of the basics. So, let's just touch on the highlight reel of dressing for success.

You may have heard this before, but it's worth emphasizing: do not dress for the job you have, dress for the job you want. If you really want to impress in an interview, don't just dress like your boss – dress like your boss's boss. There is no such thing as being too well-dressed or groomed for an interview.

How does this translate into practical terms? Firstly, wear a suit, if possible. It shows respect and sends a strong message that you are taking this meeting and your career search seriously. Even if the company with which you are interviewing is casual Friday, or casual every day of the week, wear a suit. If you can't wear a suit because it would tip off your current boss/colleagues that you're out on an interview, tell the interviewer that ahead of time. This would avoid starting off the interview with an iffy first impression.

Conservative colours for suits with white or blue shirts are the standard for men. A conservative suit with nylons and closed-toe shoes are the standard for women. Go for the professional look; avoid dressing too trendy because people's perception of trendy varies a great deal and you could end up just looking strange. Take note of the details – make sure your watch, belt, purse, shoes, jewelry are in keeping with the overall impression you want to make. An interviewer will pay close attention to these details.

Now that we've discussed what we're going to say, how we're going to say it and how we're going to package ourselves as we say it, it's time to review the other tools at your disposal in your quest for that bigger and better job.

The resume

You would be amazed at what you can tell about a person from their resume alone. The resume is usually the leading piece of information about you – it is your own personal 'ad', and will either entice or deter an interviewer from wanting to meet/hire you. Most seasoned recruiters can tell within 80% accuracy how you will present in an interview based solely on your resume.

In essence, a resume tells your story on paper. Remember what we said earlier in this discussion about effective communication: 20% is about visual perception. This applies to your resume as well. Pay attention to the font, spacing, headings and sub-headings – look at the alignment and the amount of white space on the page. Try to find a resume of someone at a more advanced level, perhaps your boss or your boss's boss. If you like their layout, copy the format. A lack of attention to detail in your resume may actually prevent you from getting an interview. For further guidance on this topic, see our Resume Writing article in the resource section of our website.

The cover letter

The cover letter is not worth spending too much time discussing. Some interviewers seldom even review the cover letter. It is more of a formality that tells the interviewer why they should review your resume. We personally review all cover letters and resumes forwarded to us because if someone is not a match for the position in which they are applying, they may be a good fit for another position. As far as the cover letter goes: use proper business format, keep it simple and do not repeat anything word-for-word in your resume, make it appealing to entice the reader to review your resume, and address the hiring authority properly with correct name and title. It is our estimate that 20% of candidates either misspell the interviewer's name or use the improper salutation by calling a Ms. a Mister or Sir. If someone cannot get the most basic detail correct, the application may get discarded without the interviewer even reviewing the resume.

So there you have it – the short and simple mechanics of selling yourself to get that next bigger and better job. Some of you will have heard much of this before. Some of you may just be starting out in your career and will be hearing these tips for the first time. In either case, it is all beneficial. If you review, practice and pay close attention to the above guidelines, you'll end up miles ahead of the competition.

Of course, this is the short and simple version of selling yourself in an interview. We would be happy to provide you with additional individualized tips when you interview with us.

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