

Know what to say to clinch the job

By Susan Bowles, special for USATODAY.com

The candidate was perfect on paper. But his dazzling resume couldn't save him after he told Marjorie Brody, "Those who can, can and those who can't, teach."

"I said, 'Do you realize what business we're in?'" says Brody, president of Brody Communications in Jenkintown, Pa. "We're corporate trainers. We teach."

Mr. Paper-Perfect didn't get the job. As he found out, the interview — not a first-class resume or glowing references — cinches the deal.

That's doubly true today. Companies are trying to do more with less, and they're taking extra care before investing in new employees. Graduates who enter an interview knowing what to say, what to avoid and what to expect will land the best jobs.

Follow these 10 tips to wow your interviewers.

1. Do your homework.

Tom O'Hara, managing editor of *The Plain Dealer* in Cleveland, Ohio frequently interviews candidates who rave about his newspaper. "Then you ask them, 'Tell me about a story you liked,' and of course, some have never read the newspaper," he says.

Learning about the company is crucial, says Matt DeLuca, president of Management Resource Group in New York and author of several career books. It shows you're serious about the job, you're proactive and you're prepared.

Thanks to the Internet, "it's impossible not to find meaningful and relevant information," DeLuca says. He recommends checking out the company to be sure it's financially sound and learning about top executives and people you're slated to meet. "You will be three legs up on the competition."

2. Practice makes perfect.

Know what an interviewer is likely to ask and be ready with answers. Three favorite questions: What are your strengths and weaknesses? Tell me about yourself. Where do you want to be in five years?

Sarah Michel, a career coach and owner of Pathways in Colorado Springs, recommends creating a two-minute summary of yourself: Where did you grow up? What's interesting about you? What's your college major?

"The last 15 seconds should answer the question 'Why am I here today?'" she says. "If you can do that drill, you will nail the interview."

3. Appearances count.

Before interviewing, consider your personal style and be sure you're talking to companies that fit who you are. "It's very much like a uniform," Brody says of appearance. "If you can't fit in with the culture that's expected there, you're not going to be very happy."

You're unlikely to lose out on a job because you look too conservative. But you may hurt your chances if you're dressed too casually, if your makeup and jewelry are excessive or if you wear that eyebrow ring.

4. Defer to all.

Rudeness raises questions about how you'll treat clients, vendors and industry peers. Don't get in a tiff with the security guard. Be polite to the receptionist. Smile at the support staff.

"I've had people who were wonderful to me, but they were not nice to the support staff," Brody says. They didn't get the job.

5. Come prepared.

Bring copies of your resume, a separate list of references, evaluations from any former employers and feedback from previous clients or customers. It's a good idea to have something to write on. "But don't take too much. You shouldn't have a briefcase and a computer," DeLuca says. A clean, neat notepad should be adequate.

If you must carry a cell phone, be sure it's off. DeLuca recalls interviewing a student whose phone rang, and he asked if he could take the call.

6. Know what to expect.

Information is power, so ask a lot of questions when scheduling your interview, Michel says. Find out how many people will interview you at one time and who those people are. Ask if you'll be tested, as some industries quiz your professional skills.

- Typically, an HR professional will screen you before you meet anyone else in the company. This interview assesses how well you fit the firm and if you have the basic skills required.
- If you pass muster with human resources, you'll meet people more closely connected to the job you want. "That's also when [how you] fit becomes more important," says Karen Bloom, principal of the Chicago search firm Bloom, Gross & Associates.
- Most interviews last 45 minutes to an hour. Expect to talk to between one and five people.
- Don't be surprised if you're asked to take a drug test. While this usually doesn't happen until a company is ready to hire you,

Bloom says, the job will depend on whether you take the test and whether or not you pass.

7. Don't fear silence.

Interviewers ask a lot of open-ended questions to gauge how you react in various situations. These often stump candidates, Michel says.

To prepare, think of several experiences you can share — how you dealt with a roommate conflict or how you handled a disagreement with your professor. If asked a question that makes you pause, take time to think. "Ten seconds of silence is fine."

8. Be inquisitive.

Asking questions shows you're prepared, and may also show off your job skills. "If I ask somebody do you have any questions, and they don't have any questions, then I get concerned," O'Hara says about the potential reporters and editors he interviews.

Ask about the company and its culture. Ask about competitors. And prepare some thought-provoking inquiries, such as "What is it about your company that keeps you up at night?"

But watch questions about vacation and overtime — employers may think you're more interested in time off than doing the job. And don't ask about salary and benefits. "My feeling about salary questions is he who brings it up first loses the power," Michel says.

9. Always close the deal.

When the interview is over, ask what the next step is — even if you think things went poorly.

"It's like a sales call," Brody says. "Never leave without asking, 'What are the next steps for your company?' 'When should I expect to hear from HR?'"

10. Relax.

Sure, you may run into an interviewer who wants to put you through the psychological wringer, but for the most part, this is a straightforward process you can master with thought and preparation.

"The thing to remember is companies want to love you. They want to say, 'You're it. Oh, thank God, I can go back and do my job,'" Bloom says. "It's a far friendlier process than people think it's going to be."

To Do:

- Choose three companies you're interested in working for and research them on the Web.

- Practice answering the three most common interview questions in front of a mirror, paying attention to your body language. What are your strengths and weaknesses, tell me about yourself and where do you want to be in five years. Next, practice with a friend.
- Remove the references section from your resume and create a separate document for it.
- Find any letters of praise from past employers, clients or customers and copy them.