

How to Answer Any Interview Question by Perri Capell

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Don't be rattled by your next job interview. It's possible to answer any question that comes your way. How? By preparing and knowing how to direct the conversation to the topics you want to cover.

To start, take a tip from consultants who coach executives and politicians on how to handle media interviews. These trainers say you can deliver the message you want to an employer, regardless of the question you're asked.

"Most people don't realize that their purpose isn't to sit there and hope the right questions will be asked," says Aileen Pincus, president of the Pincus Group, a media interview-training firm in Silver Spring, Md. "They need to develop two or three key messages and make sure their point is delivered."

Unlike some politicians who ignore press questions and immediately introduce a different topic in response, job candidates must respect and directly answer employer's queries, says Jeff Braun, vice president and general manager of the Ammerman Experience, a Stafford, Texas, media interview-training firm. However, you can quickly make the transition from your answer to the important points you want to convey about your qualifications, he says.

He suggests when answering job-interview queries applying the formula $Q = A + 1$: Q is the question; A is the answer; + is the bridge to the message you want to deliver; and 1 is the point you want to make.

"If you take the '+ 1' off the formula, then the interviewer is controlling the session," says Mr. Braun.

Diligent preparation also is necessary to effectively answer any interview question, say senior executives. Theirs and media trainers' tips follow:

Study hard. Learn as much as you can about the job, the employer and its executives beforehand. Use this information to answer direct questions and to then segue into a discussion about your qualifications and fit.

Eric Herzog, a vice president of product line management and channel marketing at Maxtor Corp., a hard-disk drive company in Milpitas, Calif., says he always talks to current and former company employees and analysts whenever possible prior to job interviews to gain as much insight as he can into the employer's challenges and culture. If the company is publicly owned, he studies its financial condition by reading U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission documents, such as annual 10-K shareholder reports on the company's performance. He then tailors his interview answers to the company's issues.

"If the company is having a rough time financially, you can say that not only did you make good products or services, but that you produced things on time and under budget," says Mr. Herzog. "That's a little plus if the company is in trouble."

If you're working with a recruiter, ask him or her about what the company is seeking and its key challenges, says Derek Messulam, vice president of rental market development for GE-Capital Solutions, a financial-services unit of General Electric Co. in Norwalk, Conn. Mr. Messulam says he grills recruiters

regarding a job's responsibilities and the attributes the company wants before job interviews. He then makes sure that his answers demonstrate his potential value to an employer.

"When questions come up, you can steer the conversation to how you can demonstrate value," says Mr. Messulam. "You answer the question, but maybe not 100% the way they were expecting it."

Have anecdotes ready. Many interviewers ask questions that require candidates to provide examples of how they handled a difficult challenge or other work situation. Such questions often start with a phrase such as, "Tell me about a time when you faced...."

These questions require a story in response, but it's unlikely you have a story that fits every conceivable query. But the task of preparing becomes easier when you realize that interviewers typically are interested in only five or six general categories, says Mr. Braun. Instead of trying to be ready for every potential question, come up with stories to fit these general issues, such as how you handled conflict or a difficult challenge.

It may help to think of each issue as a bucket and mentally place a story or two in each one, says Mr. Braun. "Be more generic in your approach," he suggests. "When asked a question along one of those lines, you can move to the story you have in one of those buckets."

From his research, Mr. Messulam says he can usually tell what types of things a company might want to know about him and thinks of corresponding anecdotes. "I have seven or eight top stories that tell someone what I am good at," he says.

This strategy also works when interviewers say, "Tell me about yourself," says Lucinda Baier, former president and chief operating officer of Whitehall Jewelers Inc., a national specialty retailer and a former senior vice president of Sears Roebuck & Co.

Ms. Baier left Chicago-based Whitehall in December after it accepted an agreement with an investor to become private. She left Sears in April 2004 when the credit and financial products division she headed was sold to Citibank.

When asked to tell interviewers about herself, she determines how much time she should use and then tries to describe her specific qualifications that fit the company's key issues.

"If you know what challenges the company is facing, you can tailor your response to what the company is dealing with and how you can help," she says.

Be positive about the negative. Count on being asked about a past mistake or blemish on your career record, and don't try to dodge the issue. Ms. Pincus advises. "If you have a vulnerability, you need to be prepared to answer the question," she says. "There should be no lying or dodging. Just answer it and move on."

When discussing a mistake, be ready to say how you learned or benefited from it. "You learn as much by dropping the ball as you do by catching it," says Mr. Herzog. When interviewing for his current job, which he started in August, Mr. Herzog says he mentioned he had been involved in successful turnarounds and one that failed. "And I said what I learned from it," he says.