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## How to sell yourself in an interview

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By D.A. Hayden and Michael Wilder  
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We've heard some career experts say that an interview is a "conversation" between you and the interviewer. Don't believe it.

To us, a great interview is a *sales pitch*. It may be cleverly disguised as a conversation, but make no mistake: your goal is to convince the interviewer that you're the right person for the job. In our book, that's selling. The more effective you are at doing it, the clearer your message, the more likely you are to land the job. It's that simple, and that complicated.

Next time you have an interview, try using some of these tried and true sales strategies. They really work:

### 1. Think like an interviewer

Before you answer an interviewer's question, think about your answer from their point of view. If your interviewer says, "Tell me about your college education," ask yourself, "Is he really interested in what I did in college, or does he want to know what I learned from the experience?" If you're questioned about your work history - and you will be - is it important to talk in detail about every summer job or internship you ever had, or is it more meaningful to focus on the skills you developed while doing them?

Spend a little time thinking about what the interviewer is really looking for by asking a given question, and then critique your answers from the other side of the desk. It will make you a much more effective, and memorable, interviewee.

### 2. Use key messages to help you sell

A resume is really just a laundry list. It tells an interviewer where you went to college, what jobs you've had, and when, and what activities and hobbies you enjoy in your spare time. What it cannot do is communicate who you are and what you know that might be of value to an employer. That's your job in an interview, and that's where *key messages* come in. Make them part of every answer.

Think of a key message as a headline in an ad. An effective headline communicates the benefits of the product or service in a meaningful and memorable way. A good answer does the same thing.

The next time you're asked about your college experience, don't tell your interviewer about every detail of your college years, the courses you took, the friends you made, your extracurricular activities, and your favorite professor. For one thing, it's boring; for another, he's heard it all before. Instead, talk about what you learned, how college taught you to live on your own, to work under pressure, to function as part of a team, to manage your workload. These are your key messages. And this is the kind of information your interviewer is waiting to hear.

### 3. Demonstrate by example

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If you make a statement about your abilities, such as "I'm a good problem solver" or "I can handle high pressure situations," be prepared to have an example ready to support the claim. Nothing is quite as embarrassing as not being able to come up with an occasion in which you demonstrated a quality you say you possess. Remember, it's the example that makes your claim credible. Without it, it's just boasting.

#### **4. Avoid the "Tell me about yourself" trap**

This is the interview question candidates fear the most because, they think, an interviewer is asking them for a summary of their entire life, delivered in a single answer. Not so. What it really means is, "I haven't bothered to read your resume, so why don't you do it for me." That's why we call it the "lazy man question."

Unfortunately, it has also become an increasingly popular method of beginning an interview, so it's best to be prepared for it.

First, avoid the temptation to launch into a synopsis of your resume. It's a big mistake. For one thing, you'll lose your interviewer. For another, you'll leave yourself nothing to talk about for the rest of the interview.

Second, understand that, by asking this question, the interviewer is really saying, "Why are you here and what do you want?" Looked at from that perspective, the right answer is less daunting. Let's say you're interviewing with a large publishing firm. A good answer might be, "I've recently graduated from XYZ College with a major in English Literature, and I'm looking for a position as an editor's assistant. I think the experience I've gained while interning with a number of smaller publishing firms, combined with my passion for writing, could be of interest to your company."

Why is this a good answer? Because it clearly answers the interviewer's real question, hints at some of your most saleable strengths, passion, and experience, and leaves

a lot left to talk about during the remainder of your interview.

#### **5. Make your key messages relevant**

Any great salesman will tell you that the most persuasive sales pitch is the one that speaks directly to the personal needs of the buyer. A great interview works the same way. Let's say you're applying for an associate producer position at a TV station and you're asked to talk about your strengths. Which is more effective? To mention your ability to work well under pressure? Or, to say, "I understand that the production people at this station have to work against some pretty tough deadlines. It's the reality of the business. I think that my experience at college, where I carried six courses per semester, combined with the time I spent working as a page at one of the major networks, suggests I could thrive in a production environment like yours." Remember, by making it meaningful, you make it memorable.

#### **6. Don't talk yourself out of a job**

What's the most common interviewing mistake made by inexperienced candidates? Answer: they stop thinking long before they stop talking. Too often, what should be a simple response to a straightforward question gets turned into an aimless, directionless ramble. Maybe it's nerves. But whatever the cause, no interviewer responds positively to a casserole of unconnected thoughts, with no message and no end.





The five steps of a well-constructed interview answer are:

1. Pause
2. Take a deep breath
3. Think about what you want to say
4. Say it
5. When you're finished, stop.

One last piece of advice. The secret to effectively selling yourself is practice. Stand in front of the mirror, talk to yourself in the car, rehearse with your friends. Whatever works. But keep this in mind: an interview is no place to try these strategies out for the first time.

Most importantly, don't forget that interviewing is about selling. The better you are at weaving your key sales messages into your answers, the more likely you are to stand out in the interviewer's mind. And setting yourself apart from the crowd is what interviewing is all about.

*D.A. Hayden and Michael Wilder are founding partners of Hayden-Wilder, a one-on-one counseling firm specializing in preparing recent college graduates for the real world job market. For more information about Hayden-Wilder, visit [www.haydenwilder.com](http://www.haydenwilder.com).* ■

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