

Remember to see the interviewer as a person, not just a company representative.

Interview Small Talk Makes a Big Impression

"Oh, I notice you went to Whittier College. So did I."

"You were at Disney for two years? I worked for Disney too."

"Toastmasters? I'm in Toastmasters too."

All of the above are opening gambits I've used while interviewing job candidates. They often were greeted with an "uh huh" while the interviewee waited for a "real" question.

As an executive recruiter, I always tried to engage candidates in a conversation to make interviews more comfortable. Over the years, I noticed that most interviewees were so focused on the task of selling themselves in an interview they forgot they were dealing with a person. They couldn't put themselves in the shoes of the interviewer.

This lack of imagination is also evident at meetings and conferences where the "me-focused" push their own networking needs and fail to ask about the other person.

While interviewing and job networking during an economic downturn, it's important to stand out, not as

just a good potential employee, but as a team player. There are four areas that are often forgotten in the heat of the interview:

1 Empathy. Recruiters review literally thousands of resumes and may interview a hundred candidates in a week. Sometimes, their meetings become rote. Luckily, some interviewers try to make the situation more fun by introducing interesting conversational topics. If you're fortunate enough to receive a conversational bone such as "I'm a Toastmaster too," jump on it!

Most job seekers go to as many meetings as they can in search of job opportunities. As the recipient of piranha-like questioning about jobs at my past employers, I've felt like screaming. There is a fine line between assertiveness

Questions to Ask an Interviewer:

- How long have you been with the company?
- What changes have you seen since you joined?
- What is your management style?
- How do you motivate others?
- What do you see in the future for this industry?

Note: All of these questions will illicit a personal response from the interviewer. They are specific vs. general.

and desperation. Consider how your listener hears you. When making contacts while networking, think of long-term benefits, not short-term results.

2 Common courtesy. I remember being startled when an interviewee once leaned over and said, "It must be hard to interview people all day and have me come in at 4 p.m." He was right. I was blurry with exhaustion, but his comment made me realize why I'd gotten into recruiting in the first place – the people.

This gentleman, and that's truly the word for him, asked how long I'd worked for the company, how I got into recruiting and why I stayed in it. In an hour-long meeting, we spent about five minutes on me. I realized later that he'd also picked up a lot of information about his audience and my company along the way.

As an interviewer, I've often felt dehumanized by candidates. It seemed as though they viewed me merely as a conduit to the company. I usually remembered in a positive way those candidates who asked how long I had been with the company and where I felt the company was

Small Talk Leads To Big Gains

There is a direct correlation between your skill as a conversationalist and your ability to interview for a job. As Toastmasters, we have tools that can put us ahead of the pack in these competitive times!

Remember your first club meeting. You were nervous. You didn't know anybody. You didn't know what to expect. Sounds a little like a job interview, doesn't it? What helped you relax and turn the negative churning into excitement? Small talk! One of the Toastmasters (or more) probably came up to you and involved you in a conversation. He or she asked questions about your decision to come to a meeting and your background.

The member tried to pull information out of you to hook onto something he or she could relate to. "My son also goes to George Washington Elementary!" "I used to work for ABC Company!" By the time you had a few of these conversations, you were relaxed and probably receptive to joining the club! As you became a seasoned Toastmaster, you became a seasoned conversationalist yourself.

Connect the dots between Toastmasters' small talk and job interview skills:

■ **Remember that you are a Toastmaster and more experienced than the average job applicant.** This is

your time to shine, to show an interest in the interviewer and to use small talk to your advantage. You have an edge over the competition as you use gracious conversation to make the interview go smoothly.

■ **Use small talk as a tool.** Marlene Cain, ATM-B, a member of Simispeak Professional Club in Simi Valley, California, is the principal of Mar Cain Communication. As a career consultant, she advises: "The smart job seeker uses small talk as a tool. The purpose is to uncover something that you have in common which will help establish rapport. Now, you are no longer a stranger, you are an acquaintance. It is much easier to hire an acquaintance than a stranger."

■ **Look for physical clues and verbal cues.** As you look around the interviewer's office, note diplomas, pictures and awards. All of these might be clues to helping you enhance the meeting. "I notice you graduated from UCLA. My brother graduated from there, too!" Verbal cues are even easier for the Toastmaster. If the interviewer says, in passing, "When I moved here from Florida, I..." you have an opening! "I lived in Florida for a year. Where did you live?"

■ **Get the person talking.** Isn't that the purpose of Toastmasters? Ray Cech, president of Dunhill Executive

going, and responded to my conversational overtures. I could “see” them on board, working.

3 It's an interview, not an interrogation. There's nothing more frustrating for a recruiter than to be faced with a candidate who answers as though he or she is being interrogated by the FBI. “Yes” and “no” aren't satisfactory answers.

As a professional speaker, I use a technique called “the string of pearls.” Basically, it means connecting one thought to another. You may want to try this technique during interviews. Here's an example of how you would converse:

- **Interviewer:** So that's the history of the company. We're expanding in the next few years, but you can see where we've come from.”
- **Candidate:** “That's very interesting. I'd read about the company on the Web, but you've put its history in perspective for me. How long have you been here?”
- **Interviewer:** “I've been here about two years.”
- **Candidate:** “Oh. What changes have you seen since you came on board?”

4 Interest. Let's face it, some interviewers are terrible. As a job hunter, I've had my share. One interviewer said to me, “I can't get a handle on you.” Another said he'd been told to interview me, and so he “might as well.”

Even seasoned recruiters can question by rote, especially if they're getting little response. Some of the best interviewees are those who show more than a passing interest in the company, the job and their future. These job seekers show that they're looking at the big picture, not just a mirror. They'll often say things like:

“May I follow up on that question a little to clarify?”

“I have a few questions about the job; when would it be appropriate for me to ask them?”

“I have over 10 years in succession planning with high-level executives. What level would I be working with in this job?” This question has the added advantage of helping the interviewer visualize you in the job.

Most of all, remember to see the interviewer as a person, not just a company representative. It *isn't* just about you. ■

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Search of Los Angeles, says preparation is key. We all know that we should do company research. Cech suggests going beyond the basic facts to what he calls “incidentals.” Throughout the interview, you should look for openers. You might, for example, ask about a charity the company sponsors or the interviewer's take on something you read about the industry in the paper. Talking to the receptionist or secretary will also give you clues about the company and, hopefully, the hiring official. You might ask how long

they have been with the company and how they like it.

■ **Step into the shoes of the interviewer.** When I worked as a recruiter, I found myself often bored after interviewing job candidates. The same questions over and over. The same answers. The applicants who stood out were those who involved me as a person. They might have asked a question about my opinion or use something I said as a hook for making a comment.

Your understanding of your “audience” and use of empathy will make the interviewer feel like a person and help humanize *you* in a competitive situation.

Turning an interview into a conversation using small talk should be easy for a Toastmaster. As Marlene Cain says, “If you look at the agenda of a typical Toastmasters meeting, most of the speaking opportunities are impromptu.” Every week provides interview preparation for a Toastmaster! ■

Sinara O'Donnell, ATM-B, is the principal of SinaraSpeaks, a professional-speaking firm specializing in career issues in Springfield, Missouri. Visit her Web site www.sinaraspeaks.com.