

10 Tips for Setting Yourself Apart from Other Job Candidates

By Lancelot Larsen

During the 2004 Summer Olympics, there was a swim meet that Michael Phelps won. To the naked eye it looked like one or two other swimmers reached the end of the pool at the same time. Although it could not be clearly seen with all the water and hands flashing about, one finger hit the gizmo one second — if that — sooner than the others. But who could tell? The trust was in the power of the gizmo itself.

So, what happened during this swim meet? Did Michael Phelps really “win”? Is one second — or a split second — a worthy measure of one “winning” over another? Was Michael Phelps’s middle finger half an inch longer than his secondary competitor’s? Was it really an extra bit of length in mere anatomy that established Michael Phelps as the winner of that swim meet?

One swimmer was meant to win that meet, and if it was simply a matter of being just slightly faster or having a longer middle finger, so be it. And so it goes with your interview.

Only one candidate can fill one position. More than likely, if your resume got selected for an interview, you have been deemed qualified for the position. If interviewers cannot find one thing wrong with your credentials or your competitors’ credentials, they will look to find things wrong with how you conduct yourself during the interview.

Submitting the perfect resume is never enough. And your perfect credentials are not enough either. You, yourself, must be perfect. To prove this you must master the interview.

As soon as you walk through that door, you will be judged from top to toe — everything from the way you look to the way you sit on the other side of the desk to the way your words fly or fall out of your mouth. The interview process is established to determine if you can serve hot fudge sundaes like you say you can. But it’s more about determining if you can serve them with a smile and a cherry on top. If you and a dozen other applicants can prove that you can carry a tray, you will have the advantage over them if you can show that you can not only carry a tray but accessorize the delectability of the service as well.

The following are 10 tips that will help you show the interviewer that you are as flawless as your resume:

The Five Dos

Do Be Presentable:

- Refrain from using perfumes and colognes. The interviewer might be allergic, or it could trigger an unpleasant memory associated with your chosen scent.
- Be prompt but no more than 15 minutes early, as you don’t want to be perceived as a loiterer or albatross by anyone, even the receptionist (in case his or her opinion is asked).

- Silence your cell phone. This is a must. Do you want to be remembered as “The Cell Phone Candidate” when you and the no-nickname interviewee are tied at the finish line for candidacy with the company?
- Greet the interviewer by his or her last name and make sure you pronounce it properly.
- Smile and give a firm handshake to show a measure of reasonable eagerness.
- Remain standing until you are offered a chair. When seated, keep upright and looking interested at all times, but do not appear insincere.

Do Be Prepared:

- List what the most common uncomfortable questions might be and practice your answers.
- Put yourself in the mind frame of the interviewer and think about how your answers could be construed as negatives or lead to further questions. In other words, don't just know how to answer the tough questions; know how to answer them specifically and with a positive angle.
- Think about any negative thoughts you might have about experiences you had at your former place of employment. If you are wary that you might have similar experiences at the company to which you are applying, create subtle ways in which you can question the interviewer so as to help you decide if you want to take the job if offered.
- Find someone who's willing to help you conduct a mock interview with feedback.
- Should you be asked illegal questions, say as little as possible and give evasive answers that will bring the interview back into more acceptable subjects.

Do Be Communicative:

- Maintain eye contact at all times and respond articulately. Don't mumble and stutter or look at the wall during every answer you give. If you are a soft-spoken person or have an accent, this is the time to make the extra effort to amplify or articulate your speech. Not maintaining proper eye contact might imply you cannot be trusted. If maintaining eye contact is difficult for you, look between the interviewer's eyes. It will look as if you are making eye contact.
- Be mindful of your physical movements. Remain calm at all times and avoid shaking your leg, wringing your hands, playing with your hair, or contorting your face.
- Speak in standard American English and avoid nondescriptive monosyllables. Avoid using slang or the English of the streets, as well as “um,” “uh,” and “like” (when not being used in a simile). Too much of this will distract from your message.

Do Be Inquisitive:

- As soon as the interview starts, make a discreet attempt to find out from the interviewer what the job duties entail. You want to start building an impromptu strategy for how you will answer all following questions and make statements about your transferable skills and experience.

Do Be Honest:

- Tell it like it is or don't bother with the interview. If you lie, you will get caught. Be forthright with the information they seek, including describing accomplishments accurately and mentioning affirmatively jobs you had and why you don't have them anymore. If you don't establish trust at the interview, you will not be considered trustworthy enough to work for the company.

The Five Don'ts

Don't Be Uncommunicative:

- Do not clam up. Do not answer with only a "yes" or a "no." Give a brief explanation for everything. Even if you don't understand the question or need time to think about it, say so. Don't evade the question or give an answer to a question you assume you heard right. If you don't talk, you will not be considered.

Don't Be Codependent:

- Do not regurgitate your resume. You need to be more convincing than that. The interview is for explaining the relevance of your resume. Do not depend solely on the who, what, and where; emphasize the how and the why.
- Do not assume you will be asked the usual line of questioning. These days, you might be asked bizarre questions such as "What kind of animal would you be?" or "How do you make a sandwich?" These questions are posed to see how you react to the unexpected and behave under pressure. The only "right" answer to these questions is how you answer them, not what you answer.

Don't Be Negative:

- Do not say destructive things about your past or present employer. Even if how you left the company was unjust and you are right to expose your past situation as it was, in a negative light, it will be in your best interest to leave it be. Put everything in a positive light. The interviewer wants to make sure that you are not a negative person but one who will focus on solutions, not problems. He or she also wants to make sure you are not a blamer. More accurately, however, the employer will assume that if you feel at liberty to say bad things about your former boss, you will do the same with him or her.

Don't Be Overbearing:

- Do not give unnecessarily expansive or ornate answers to questions. It should only take you two or three minutes to answer each question. The attention span for most interviewers does not exceed three minutes. Any answer longer than that will probably be lost on them.
- Do not ignore body signals that your answer has been running on for too long. If you see the interviewer looking or leaning away from you or shifting in his or her seat too much, you know it's time to put a lid on it. Always ask yourself if you have answered the question sufficiently.
- Do not boast. Every interviewee needs to learn how to walk the line between being confident and being pompous. Saying "I deliver a strong work product" is better than saying "I work so hard I make everyone around me look lazy." Saying "I have quality contacts in the film industry" is better than saying "Not only do I know everyone in Hollywood, but I know everyone in Bollywood as well and even a few big people in Tollywood."
- Do not get too wrapped up in yourself. If the interviewer asks you where you see yourself in five years, don't use this time as a platform to tell the interviewer how you want to take over the company in the distant future and use your money to establish a mega-resort in North Goa while writing your memoirs. Just talk about subjects related to your immediate professional goals and how you plan to make them happen. Modest subjects like growth and seeking new challenges are safe.
- Do not, on the contrary, be overwhelmed by the interview either. The interview is not an interrogation. When interviewees perceive the interview like this, they tend to lose focus, give vague answers, and talk in cycles. Show confidence by relating previous answers to following questions and asking for further clarification or elaboration upon the interviewer's responses.

Don't Be Compensation-Minded:

- Do not ask about money, benefits, bonuses, or vacation time. However, if you're asked how well you think you should be compensated, respond based on what you think the market calls for — research beforehand if you have to. Always complete this answer by indicating that you are more interested in personal and professional growth than you are in savings account growth.
- Do not, however, let this question go unprepared for. If asked, you may try being discreet and ask for the figure for the position for which you are applying. If you are staying within the same line of work in the same sort of position, you could give a ballpark figure centered on what you make now. Nevertheless, this is a big question, so be ready.