

THREE QUALITIES TO CAPTIVATE INTERVIEWERS

BY PHILIP WEINZEIMER

Just embarking on a job search, a graduating M.B.A. in management at Hong Kong University hoped to land a position at a consulting firm. With his undergraduate B.S. degree in computer science from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Sloane School and his new M.B.A. degree, he was confident of receiving several offers.

But job hunting was a new skill. To make sure he'd do well in interviews, he needed to develop an effective strategy. He decided to call his uncle, a businessman, for advice. His uncle coached him on a strategy that not only got him the job but also helped him to negotiate a salary that was 25% more than he expected.

If you do nothing else, his uncle said, concentrate on making these three points during your interviews:

- First, demonstrate an understanding of the company's competitors and why the company should focus on its customers.
- Second, be ready to explain why employees need to work together to complete jobs and provide examples of when you've successfully worked in teams.
- Third, show when you've been creative at work, personally taken responsibility for and owned a problem and quickly completed tasks.

He reminded his nephew that "just saying these words" wasn't enough to impress hiring managers. A good interviewer will know if you memorized your responses or if you really understand, believe in and can demonstrate these concepts in your job. His nephew must internalize these thoughts to effectively communicate them during the interview, he said.

Job candidates in general can benefit from this advice. To succeed with interviewers, you must exhibit business behaviors that show you're focused on the customer, can be an effective team





player and will perform tasks and assignments efficiently and independently. The following tips can help you adopt these concepts and become more effective during job interviews.

1. FOCUS ON CUSTOMER VALUE.

Employees who understand the dynamics affecting customers and the marketplace focus on important goals when doing their jobs. By never losing sight of the customer while showing that you know your company's niche, your career will benefit and your organization will reap rewards.

Ford Harding, president of Harding and Associates in Maplewood, N.J., and author of "Creating Rainmakers: The Manager's Guide to Training Professionals to Attract New Clients" (1998, Adams Media), says he tries to communicate the importance of having a customer focus on candidates he coaches through the interview process.

"Too often, prospective employees spend too much time focusing on their functional skills," he says. "Employers are looking for individuals who understand the value of their work from the customer's perspective as well as the dynamics in today's competitive marketplace."

Even if a specific position isn't available, a company will create one when candidates with these qualities become available, says Robert J. Bailey, senior vice president of quality assurance and administration for Hertz Corp. in Park Ridge, N.J.

"It's never the wrong time to hire the right person, especially if they're customer focused and understand the competitive market," he says.

Mr. Bailey and his team have created a variety of products that provide extra value to Hertz customers, including the Hertz #1 Club Gold upgraded service program, on-board Never-Lost navigation system, a "covered return" area for cars and other innovations.

But finding executives who make customers their first priority isn't easy, Mr. Bailey says. He once negotiated with a manager who was responsible for car rental, airline and hotel reservations for a large oil company. The manager was "a tough negotiator" who wanted to help employees leave airports quickly by getting them into rental cars swiftly, Mr. Bailey says. While he was concerned about price, he was more concerned about service. He also showed initiative. When employees had problems renting cars, he would call Hertz to suggest ways to eliminate the roadblocks.

Mr. Bailey says he realized the executive was "a doer, not a complainer." Impressed, he hired him at Hertz within 30 days.

To demonstrate a customer focus during interviews, research the company and its competitors on the Internet. You'll find names of key executives, financial data and success stories. Seek information that can help you convey your desire to improve customer value during your interview.



2. BE AN EFFECTIVE TEAM PLAYER.

Just Born, a Bethlehem, Pa., manufacturer of jelly beans and marshmallow candies, has experienced 20% annual growth during the past 10 years, compared to an industry growth rate of 5% to 7%. The company has achieved this success by hiring and training employees who can work in teams to solve business problems.

Ross Born and David Schaeffer, the company's co-presidents, created an environment that emphasized team work so that employees would feel "empowered to make the right decisions to help business improve," says Mr. Schaeffer.

The company holds regular employee meetings to discuss problems and solicit ideas. At one of them, Mr. Born asked, "What makes our organization work so well together?" A customer service manager replied, "We're empowered to make decisions to solve business problems."

A manufacturing supervisor said employees weren't "constrained by our functional organization. When we see a problem, wherever it is, we feel that we need to work together to solve it."

A shipping supervisor said that the ability of all employees to work together regardless of rank or status was important. "We don't care what position anyone has," she said. "What we care about is that we communicate well with each other and have the confidence in each other's decision-making ability." Added an hourly employee on the jelly-bean line, "we know we can depend on each other for help."

Just Born employees are customer-focused, empowered, creative and work effectively in teams. In short, they exhibit organizational behaviors that allow them to concentrate on business issues and get results.

To impress hiring managers, use your network of contacts to learn about the importance of teamwork at prospective employers. To borrow from the film and Broadway play, "Six Degrees of Separation," you're never more than six people away from someone you want to contact. Try out this premise and you'll learn that it's true. Also think about when you've worked on a team to improve business results and be prepared to tell interviewers about the value you and your team provided.

3. SHOW YOU CAN WORK CREATIVELY AND INDEPENDENTLY.

At Hewlett Packard Corp. in Palo Alto, Calif., innovation, speed and taking ownership are embedded in the company's culture. These fundamentals helped revenues to nearly triple to \$43 billion and net income to quadruple to almost \$3.1 between 1992 and 1997. Almost half of HP's revenues are from sales of products developed during the previous two years.

This track record comes from "our employees' ability to think out of the box and create products and services that customers need," says manager Mary Lou Simmermacher.



When interviewing potential employees, company managers assess their ability to take ownership of problems, think creatively and perform jobs quickly. Functional skills are important but in today's market, "it's creativity and speed that counts," says Ms. Simmermacher.

During interviews, many employers also try to determine if candidates are creative and could solve problems independently. Tony Salvaggio, president of Computer Aid Inc., a business and technology consulting firm in Allentown, Pa., says the company knew that finding employees with these capabilities was critical when it was founded 16 years ago.

"We can provide all the training and coaching necessary, but it boils down to people understanding what they have to do and then doing it well," he says.

Computer Aid pursues candidates who can think out-of-the-box and act quickly on their ideas, Mr. Salvaggio says. Clients always comment on the creative ability of the company's consultants and how rapidly they complete tasks and projects.

"We look for creativity, speed and ownership," says Joe Hessmiller, a division manager who hires entry-level consultants. Many have music backgrounds, experience running their own businesses and a track record of community involvement. Finding creative and innovative people has helped Computer Aid provide customer value and grow to 1,800 employees from 625 in 1993.

To convey your creative abilities, focus on interesting accomplishments during your career and how they supported a company's goals. Managers are more likely to hire candidates who are creative and get things done quickly than those who only discuss their functional skills.

Companies continually seek new hires who can think strategically, work effectively in teams and have the self-confidence and skills to complete assignments quickly. When preparing for interviews, think about how you can demonstrate customer focus, organizational teamwork and individual initiative.