

Tell better stories in interviews

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For many job seekers, practice makes perfect. They memorize common interview questions, polish their responses and leave nothing to chance. After all, who wants to say "Umm…" when asked about their greatest achievement?

But those automatic, well-rehearsed answers can doom your chances, short-circuiting the opportunity to develop rapport with the person on the other side of the desk. Stories, not sound bites, are what candidates need in order to make an impression and forge powerful connections, according to Ronald Mitchell, CEO and co-founder, GottaMentor.com, a career mentoring Web site. Managers conducting interviews will not be wowed by a recap of your résumé. Instead, Mitchell and others suggest that what will resonate are stories starring you as the likeable hero, specific depictions of how you pulled together your skills and experience to accomplish something important and bring about a happy ending for an employer.

Distilling your work experience into a handful of adaptable stories that demonstrate why you're the best person for a job involves synthesis, the second-highest form of cognition on Benjamin Bloom's famed taxonomy of educational objectives. On a primal level, stories engage listeners and invite them to connect through shared experiences. A well-told story is one of the most powerful ways to connect with another human being.

"Hiring managers are people. And people like to hear stories," says Laura Allen, a career consultant in New York City. "If you tell a clear, concise and compelling story that grabs their attention, they are going to remember you."

The stories Allen is talking about don't involve fibs or embellished fish tales. A job seeker's story should be a unique account, told in story form, which reveals who you are and what you can do. And no, it's not about the pie-eating contest you won in seventh grade at the country fair. Compelling, job-related story telling gives shape to professional, educational and personal experiences and attributes that are relevant to the given job description. An example, Mitchell says, would be how you helped your previous company launch a new product and what that might have entailed: going back to the drawing board several times, achieving consensus among upper management, motivating sales staff.

Consultant Laura Allen is a big believer in the power of stories to make job candidates memorable and stand out from the crowd.

"Facts and figures are hard to remember. Compelling, honest, unique stories that show how you are amazing at what you do are hard to forget," she says. An unusual story of how a salesperson closed a sale – "Maybe you landed a deal while you were in the dentist's chair getting a root canal," Allen offers – is the sort of detail that listeners don't soon forget. "When you are interviewing with a number of decision makers, these stories become even more important," says Allen. "When the decision makers are comparing notes, they'll say, 'What did you think of that woman who got a client while she was having a root canal? She must be a real go-getter!'"

A persuasive story "shows how you made an impact, assumed leadership, solved a problem, those kinds of things," Mitchell says.

An effective story also is adaptable and has some depth. "The reality is, most people only have a couple of really good stories to tell, so you want yours to be transferable to the different types of questions you might be asked," he says.

GottaMentor.com teaches job seekers there are seven elements to good stories, each of which can be seen through the lenses of their professional, educational and personal experience. The seven elements that make a great workplace story are industry relevance, problem solving, communication skills, leadership or initiative, pedigree, expertise and impact.

Pedigree simply refers to the prestige factor of an accomplishment, and might involve name-dropping; for example, if the product you helped develop was featured on "The Oprah Winfrey Show."

For the nuts and bolts of your stories, make a list of professional, educational and personal examples for each of the seven story elements. For your product launch story, the marketing minor you earned in college brings your educational experience into the story. And your personal experience might be your disappointment, as a consumer, with existing products on the market and how that drove you to develop a superior alternative.

Each story probably won't hit on all seven elements or draw from all three wells of experience – professional, educational and personal – but different versions of the same thoughtfully developed story can answer just about any interview question. Mitchell suggests having three to five stories up your sleeve and multiple ways of telling them, emphasizing different aspects depending on the audience and line of questioning.

After all, you're not reciting "Goodnight Moon" to a toddler who lives to hear it again and again. You are characterizing yourself as the best candidate for the job. The last thing you want is to sound like a broken record or a one-hit wonder.

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