

How to Sell Yourself Without Selling Out

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For most people, the word sales conjures up images of slick hucksters with painted-on smiles and polyester suits, tactless and saccharine in their approach. Therefore it isn't too surprising when talented job seekers recoil at the prospect of having to "sell themselves" in an interview. Here are some ideas on how to convey your value to an employer without being overbearing and overconfident:

The main difference between the stereotypical salesperson described above and a top-end sales executive is one thing...the ability to listen. The majority of clients I have helped with their career-transition over the years, whether they are an industry newbie or a seasoned veteran, have had a misconception of what it means to sell their selves during an interview. The common perception of "selling yourself" has been to communicate each task accomplished in every position they have had to an employer, while simultaneously conveying their strong work ethic and ability to "pick things up quickly". This, however, is a recipe for disaster that often leads to a perception that you are more focused on yourself.

The goal of a successful interview should be to create enough rapport with the hiring manager so, to put it simply, they like you. Regardless of whether or not you have the top skills in an area, an employer will not hire you without feeling a personal connection. As a point of reference, a candidate should reach the level of rapport with a hiring manager that equates to being the type of person the boss wouldn't be embarrassed having over for dinner with his family.

Here are some ways you can sell yourself in an interview without feeling like you are selling-out:

1. Ask questions - Be an investigator. Learning more about the position by asking questions not only shows your legitimate interest in the position but also functions to transform the interview into more of a conversation. More often than not, when candidates ask an employer to tell them more about the position, other job aspects, that weren't on the 'official' posted job description, arise.
2. Make sure you understand exactly what you are being asked - If you attempt responding to broad statements such as, "Tell me about your work history", the odds of your answer being shorter than 5 minutes is slim. Counter something like this by stating, "I would be happy to. Would you like me to tell you about my most recent role at XYZ Company?" Provide an answer that is detailed but concise and then STOP TALKING! Don't fear the silence. That is your cue to ask the first question and begin the conversation that will lead to the positive rapport you need.
3. Ask why the position is open. Find out which strengths the previous person in the role had that were viewed as valuable. If the person was terminated, ask what his/her weaknesses were and what led them to initially hire them. Having this information allows you to better understand which aspects of your background to focus on or which to ignore. If the employee's strength was in tying his/her shoes, then it would be wise to bring up the fact that at XYZ Company, you won an award for shoe tying. If the employee was terminated for attendance, it would be a good idea to mention that you didn't miss one day of scheduled work all year.
4. Don't say 'No' - Saying 'No' implies you have absolutely zero knowledge of what the employer is asking you about. Make sure you relate your similar experience to what it is they are asking so they have enough ammunition to hire you when the time comes. Without any related experience, no matter how much an employer likes you, they won't be able to justify the hire to themselves or their superiors.
5. Is there anything else I can tell you about myself to assure you that I am the right person for the job? - Many times, employers make decisions based on assumptions they have made about you. Whether it is the content of your resume or the type of companies you previously worked for, an employer might think you lack a certain skill that in fact you have. This question will give an employer more confidence to ask a question that might, for one reason or another, have been tough to ask. Even if you lack direct experience with an area of concern, using the strategy explained in #4 should help you navigate through any objections presented to you.