

Interviewing Etiquette

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offices and raises the cost of company medical insurance. It also indicates a lack of common sense and/or willpower, not to mention a possibly addictive personality.

Almost as offensive as the candidate who smokes is the one who wears too much perfume or cologne. The ideal job candidate has no smell. Men should wear no aftershave, and only enough deodorant to cover up what needs to be covered. For women, perfume isn't forbidden, but an overdose can lose you the job. Nothing used to annoy me more than involuntarily having my office fumigated.

I've found that gum-chewing before an interview, if you enjoy it, can boost your confidence—just remember to spit out the gum before your name is called. Generally, keep your mouth incredibly clean and then don't worry about bad breath—the worry can be more damaging than the breath itself.

The money issue: One of the biggest contradictions in the business world concerns the attitude toward money. While everyone knows that you take a job in order to earn cash—and your bosses hope that your work will make them loads of it—to admit a rampant desire for money is hopelessly gauche. Discussing salary before you receive an offer is strictly taboo. If information about salary isn't circulating, and you really must

know, find a source with no connections to your interviewers. Otherwise, proceed at your own risk.

Farewells: Leave each interview with a smile, a handshake and a knowledge of the company's notification schedule. If the interviewer has neglected to mention it, you have every right to ask when you might expect to hear from him. Don't imply that you plan on seeing him again, but to leave the room without some idea of the future is to admit defeat.

Thank-you notes: Sadly enough, in today's job-hunting scene, thank-you notes are unnecessary. Half of the candidates my former firm hired last year didn't send a single thank-you note, and the rest need not have done so. The simple fact is that almost all interview decisions are made the day of the interview, if not during the interview itself. Any interview process that allows more than three days to elapse between interview and decision is half-baked. By the time your letter gets to the post office, your fate has been determined.

This doesn't mean you shouldn't send thank-you notes, but rather that you should be aware that their effect is once-removed. If you happen to be invited back to the firm for another round, this is when your first thank-you note can help out. A captivating note can win you an ally for the rest of the hiring

process. Unlike all other correspondence, it is a means of personal communication. Where possible, use it to make friends.

The worthwhile thank-you note, the one that wins you support at the firm, succeeds because it remembers what a thank-you note is: a sincere expression of gratitude. From the dozens of thank-you notes I've received, I can remember only a few that actually made me feel thanked. As with interviews, your goal is to make the decision maker feel good about herself, associate you with this feeling and like you because of it. Make her believe that she, through her skill, sensitivity and generosity, was so helpful during the interview that you feel compelled to thank her.

As always, don't go overboard. You have to ask yourself how enthusiastically grateful and complimentary you can be without coming off as insincere. Hopefully, you will be able to mean it.

If you follow the rules of etiquette outlined here, your interviewers will be much more likely to return the favor, both during the interview and afterwards. They realize that sending out a rejection letter is very bad manners indeed.

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A Big Fish

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to see if the group has a local chapter. If not, call the organization's national office for contact names.

While you're at the library, investigate the many specialized business directories available to help you identify and contact small companies. For example, the Corporate Technology Directory, published by Corporate Technology Information Services Inc. in Woburn, Mass., lists more than 18,000 private firms, some of which employ only 30 people.

Don't forget your college connections either. Placement offices often get calls from small companies looking for candidates, and your school's alumni office can put you in touch with 'alumni clubs' that are active in the area. Recent grads working for small- or medium-sized firms can provide excellent employment leads and strategies.

Customize your contacts

Small companies thrive on informality. Their managers are used to doing whatever it takes to get things done. In many instances, this means adopting a hands-on approach. If it needs to be done, roll up your sleeves and get

going.

Keep this philosophy in mind when you contact small companies. If the firm doesn't have a personnel manager, write to the manager of the department where you'd like to work, or contact the firm's president directly. This approach will put you in touch with the organization's key decision makers.

Remember to showcase your versatility and dedication in your contacts. Small companies are interested in concrete qualifications. "You can't give them canned answers to interview questions," says Karen Dombrowski. "They're looking for solid, sincere responses." Emphasize what you can offer and contribute to the organization now, not what you hope to achieve later.

When interviewing with small-company managers, remember that they probably can't match the salary and benefits packages of corporations. Salary offers from small firms can be as much as 10% to 20% lower than those offered by big companies for similar positions. This deficit can be offset, however, by the higher levels of responsibility and increased opportunities you'll receive. Don't make the mistake of looking for big-company 'perks' in small business settings. When

you're evaluating potential employers, remember the more intangible benefits of informality, atmosphere and professional growth. Those are tough to find at a company the size of Cleveland.

When a job is offered, be ready to act quickly. Unlike corporations, where job offers aren't extended until they've passed through a maze of organizational layers, small businesses are more likely to assess your candidacy quickly. Hecht and Dombrowski both received offers within two weeks of their first interviews.

Be prepared—some small companies may offer you a position on the spot at the end of a plant visit. If you need more time to consider the offer, negotiate for an extension. It's usually best to give yourself at least a day to think about any job offer.

Small companies represent a gold mine of career opportunities for new graduates. By uncovering hidden leads, knowing what small companies need and customizing your contacts, you'll greatly increase your chances of finding a challenging first job.

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