

HOW TO USE STARBUCKS TO WIN INTERVIEWS.

Maryanne Peabody &
Laurence J. Stybel, Ed.D.
Stybel Peabody
Associates, Inc.

By “interviews” we mean any professional situation where your goal is to successfully differentiate from your competition and achieve your objectives. The ideas in this article can be applied to sales or job search situations. Let’s start off with a case:

Stybel Peabody was providing Executive Outplacement services for a candidate who was a Chief Operations Officer. She was going to be interviewed by the CEO of a private consumer products company. That means there was not much online

financial information about the company other than D&B Reports we had provided her.

During the interview, the CEO asked why our candidate knew about the company. Our candidate response was the following:

“I’ve done some research about your company. Last year, you decided to outsource component manufacturing from the United States to China. Your key customers have been complaining about defective parts and late delivery. Wal-Mart has put you on probation.

“I have been dealing with manufacturing in China for years and global logistics is a key strength. I believe I can add value to this company as a member of your team.”

The CEO stammered, “How do you know all this??!!!”

Our client smiled and replied, “I do my homework.” She got the job.

Information Comes in Two Flavors:

Having unique knowledge your competitors lack allows you to differentiate in interviews. Information comes in two ways: secondary and primary.

Secondary information refers to information about organizations and individuals you can obtain by reading material written by others. This can be of great value when you are seeking to gain opportunities with public companies. Most of your opportunities, however, are going to be with privately held companies or nonprofits. Secondary research might have only limited value.

Examples of secondary information include D&B Reports, 10Ks, newspaper articles, published notifications on the website, etc.

Primary information means direct conversations face-to-face, by email, or over the phone. Few of your competitors take the time to conduct primary research.

Use their lack of initiative as a competitive tool to help you win.

In this article, we discuss six issues: (1) find a Starbucks (2) Create a Script. (3) Ask One Question (4) Manage Skeptical Employees. (5) Manage Open Employees (6) Convert Information in your Head into Notes (6) Limits of this Technique.

Find a Starbucks:

By “Find a Starbucks,” I mean any coffee shop where local employees often stop to pick up morning beverage prior to going to work. In many cases, it will be the Starbucks near the company location. In some cases, it means a coffee shop in the building lobby.

If you are looking at an opportunity in hospitals or universities, simply show up at the cafeteria.

Visit the facility at 7:30am and make friends with the cashier or a Barista. Explain that you are here to gather information about a specific company to help you secure a job or land a sale. Could the Barista point out someone who works at the company to help you?

Many of them are proud to do so: it is a demonstration of how well they know their customers.

Create a Script:

Prepare a standardized script and set of questions to ask each person you meet. Do not carry notes as this would distract from relationship building. Below is a sample script:

“My name is Robin Jones and I am going to be interviewing Eileen Smith for an opening in her department. I’m trying to put my best foot forward for the interview while trying to determine if this company is a good fit for me.

“Would you be willing to answer one question?”

Notice that the rationale is honest and the “ask” is simple.

Ask One Question:

“What do you like best/least about working at the company?
I’ll treat your response as confidential.”

Manage Skeptical Employees:

Most employees will react to your request with skepticism. They may refuse to cooperate or simply mouth platitudes. Thank them for their assistance. Do not ask for their name. Move on to the next person.

Manage Open Employees:

You hit “pay dirt” when your request is greeted with a smile and the person is eager to speak with you. That eagerness may reflect a desire to tell the world how wonderful the company is and/or how special your potential boss is. Under these circumstances, ask for the employee’s name and permission to repeat what you were told. This is a win for you and a win for the employee.

You can also hit “pay dirt” in another way.

Your request is also greeted with a smile and the person is eager to speak with you. But this person wants to tell you how awful things are. You listen with respect and do not ask for the person's name.

Remember that one comment from one employee does not prove anything.

If you get confirmation from other sources using the same open-end question, you now have an important piece of information.

Convert Your Information to Notes:

At the conclusion of each meeting, quickly convert your memories into notes. If you interview three people in one morning, your recollection will be hazy by the afternoon.

Limitations of this Technique:

In some corporate cultures, the very act of collecting information will be seen in a positive light: you are taking initiative, conducting appropriate diligence about a major decision in your life, etc. That positive response is an expression of corporate values.

But those same actions could also be perceived by the company as negative: you are a snoop, you are wasting employees' time, you don't accept the validity of what you have been told by authority figures, etc. That negative reaction also is a valid expression of corporate values.

In other words, the company's reaction to your having collected data is itself useful data about the values of the company.

You may be going for an interview and have been told that the search is "confidential." For example, the current incumbent is unaware that a search firm has been hired to find a replacement. If

a search is “confidential,” you have an ethical obligation to respect it.

Under these circumstances, you cannot conduct primary research.

One Final Warning.

Don't drink too much coffee!

###

Stybel Peabody & Associates, Inc. provides companies with retained search, leadership development, and executive outplacement. For further information:

Maryanne Peabody
peabody@stybelpeabody.com
stybelpeabody.com