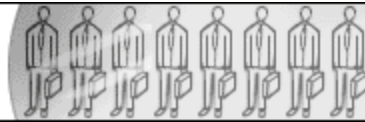


Stop Living in a Bubble



CareerJournal

from THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

*The Premier Career Site
For Executives, Managers
and Professionals*

[Print Window](#) [Close Window](#)

After the Interview, How to Earn an Offer

By Hal Lancaster

IN THIS STORY

Write to Hal Lancaster at
hal.lancaster@wsj.com

You've just finished your first interview for that dream job you've been stalking, and you're confident you did well. But now comes the tough part: closing the deal.

In these parlous economic times, companies are increasingly cautious in making hiring decisions on top managerial positions, knowing full well how expensive hiring mistakes at that level can be. They're running top candidates through a gauntlet of interviews and deliberating for weeks, even months, before pulling the trigger on a critical hire. "We're hearing of people having six or seven interviews," says Ron Krannich, a career-management consultant in Manassas Park, Va., and author of "No One Will Hire Me" (Impact Publications, 2002). "It's hard to be perky after the first interview."

So what can you do to enhance your chances during this long and frustrating period? And, just as important, what actions should you avoid?

The first rule, says a recently hired marketing executive for a new-media company in Washington, D.C., who requested anonymity, is to be patient. "Companies are being asked to do more with less, and the hiring process isn't necessarily top of mind at all times," he says. "No news is not bad news."

Here are some other tips:

- **Conduct a thorough interview postmortem and ready yourself for the next round.**

"Once you've left the interview room, write it up," says Mr. Krannich. "How do you sense things went, what things should you re-emphasize and get back to the employer on."

When Gary Rubin interviewed earlier this year for the job of vice president of university advancement at Towson University, Towson, Md., he was grilled by the university search committee, the university president, various deans and representatives of the alumni association. After a session - never during -- Mr. Rubin would jot down key points from the interview, concerns raised that needed to be answered, issues he must follow up on and any impressions he was getting, not only

from the interview, but from the surroundings. "Try to pick up on all those clues that tell you about the environment," he says. What's on the walls of the offices, what periodicals are in reception rooms, how are offices laid out? Listen to how colleagues talk to one another.

He would also note any intelligence he had gotten from the interviewers about subsequent interviewers. Information about work and accomplishments can be used as icebreakers in casual conversation. "If you're smart, you use that information," he says. "It helps create rapport."

In one instance, he learned of a mutual acquaintance he had with one interviewer. He mentioned it in passing and told the man to feel free to talk to the acquaintance about him, thus creating an instant reference.

As he passed from interview to interview, Mr. Rubin made note of frequently asked questions. Most prominent, he determined, were inquiries about why he was seeking to transfer from the nonprofit world -- he had been executive director of a large Jewish community organization -- to academia. Thus, he said, he could use the time between interviews to frame fuller responses.

In the compressed, day-and-a-half schedule of interviews at Towson, Mr. Rubin had only hours to do his postmortem. More often, the interviews are spread out, giving you more time to prepare. During that time, you should be thinking about the issues that seemed most important to the hiring team, says Kate Wendleton, president of The Five O'Clock Club, a job-search networking group based in New York. What business issues were they most concerned about? "Do some probing," she says. "Meet with other people in the field, so you can come back and say, I've been thinking about these things."

Likewise, what key issues have you learned about that weren't raised in the meeting? "Act like a consultant," she says. "You're rolling up your sleeves and doing some work instead of just saying, 'trust me, I can do this job.'"

- **Learn the lost art of letter writing.**

Career advisers strongly recommend writing detailed follow-up letters after an interview. "It's something a lot of job seekers don't do, even though we keep telling them," Mr. Krannich says. "Or they do a canned thank-you letter."

And these letters should go to everyone at the company you've come in contact with, not just the hiring manager, says Ms. Wendleton. "You're trying to build a critical mass of advocates, all of whom want you." Moreover, she adds, "you really don't know who will be the most important influencer; it may be a secretary who's a trusted adviser to the boss."

These personalized letters serve as a thank-you for the interview, a summation of the meeting and a way to address any critical issues that emerged from it, Ms. Wendleton advises. The structure of the follow-up letter is critical. In it, you should list the key issues raised during the interview and rank them in the order of their importance to the hiring team. Then, write a paragraph summarizing the issue and, if it's a business problem, how you would handle it. This is also a good time to introduce new ideas you've formulated since the meeting, or remind the hiring team of the suggestions you made during the session.

The letter may end up being a page or two long, Ms. Wendleton says, but it will be meaty and solidify your image as a deep thinker and problem solver. "Instead of just saying, 'I don't know anything about the rug industry (or whatever), but trust me, I'll learn,' you'll be able to say, 'I have

done extensive research on the rug industry and am familiar with the major players and issues," Ms. Wendleton says.

The marketing executive blanketed company decision makers with thank-you notes, expressing gratitude for the interview and enthusiasm for the job and the company. He also recapped what he had heard during the interview about how the company's business worked -- "to show I was a good listener," he says -- and reminded the interviewer of some of the ideas he had presented. He also reviewed his qualifications for the job. "I said that I heard what he said about needing experience on the shop floor, and that my years of being a shop manager, I think, would serve the company well," he recalls. "I stressed the points where I felt the match was strong."

To keep his name fresh in people's minds, and to show his enthusiasm for the company's mission, the marketing executive periodically sent key decision makers at the company articles or Web site addresses where he found information relevant to issues raised during the interview. Relevant is the key word. Don't overdo it, and don't send everything you see. "If it's irrelevant, it's a negative," he says. The idea, he says, is to "act as if you're a member of the team before you've been asked to be part of the team."

Mr. Rubin chose to keep the notes he penned for every person he met during the interview process relatively brief, expressing his thanks, his enthusiasm for the job and his promise to provide follow-up information requested by a certain time. This, he says, gives him an additional reason to make contact.

- **Don't be a pest.**

At the end of your first interview, Mr. Rubin says, you should ask what the time frame is for making a decision. "So if the person says three weeks, and it's past three weeks, you have a legitimate reason to make another inquiry."

During that call, you can ask how things are proceeding and when a decision might be expected. After that, be patient and wait for a company response. "The worst thing you can do is to seem overly desperate or harass the interviewer," he says.

- **Mine your contacts.**

If you have contacts at the company, you can ask them how the process is going. What are they hearing about, who is in contention, or about any concerns the company might have about you that you could address.

Ms. Wendleton tells of a job candidate she worked with who learned, through a company contact, that a hiring decision was being held up by one manager who had previously worked with her and found her intimidating. So she sent that person a letter, saying that she wanted to let her know how much she respected her and that her presence at the company was one of the primary reasons she wanted to work there. "That went a long way in helping her get the job," Ms. Wendleton says.

- **Keep looking.**

When you're in that period, the Washington, D.C., marketing executive says, you should continue to pursue other job opportunities. "Obviously, you don't want to put all your eggs in that one basket. And you don't want to spend your time obsessing about that job," he says. "Don't worry about the one

you think you might like," he says. "Treat it as a nonevent and keep working."

You should be able to say to that employer that you're talking with other firms, but that his is tops for you. "It makes you more marketable," Ms. Wendleton says. "If you've got nothing else going, it lessens your chance of getting the job."

[Print Window](#) [Close Window](#)

