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HIRING LINE

By Michael B. Laskoff

Don't Let Downtime Get You Down

Instead, learn how to hone your pitch and better present yourself to prospective employers. And taking a class couldn't hurt either

Times are tough for the unemployed. Even with the economy showing signs of life, no one predicts a quick rebound in the employment market. If you're unemployed, that means plenty of competition is out there, vying for the same jobs you are. When faced with similar situations, I've always sought to portray my professional experience and future prospects in ways that gave me an edge over candidates with similar qualifications.

Such an effort begins with presenting past achievements in the strongest light. It continues with showing that I know how to use my time productively and how to portray myself as someone who will be successful in the future. Here are some tips on how get an edge over others in your job hunt:

Pay attention to basic marketing. Nothing is more fundamental to a job search than a résumé. You might think that everyone would prepare an eye-grabber -- short, informative, and intriguing. Yet one of the most common laments among executive recruiters and hiring counselors is about résumés. Far too many are filled with extraneous information that does nothing to recommend the job seeker and is so boring it could cure insomnia.

Imagine being the poor soul who has to review tens or hundreds of these to fill a single position. If that doesn't sound appealing, work hard to put together something brief, focused, and punchy. It could elevate your résumé over that of someone with equal or greater experience.

And this approach should extend to all forms of written communication, including cover letters, thank-you notes, and the periodic updates that you should send to your network of contacts. It's no good having a great résumé if you simply embarrass yourself with questionable grammar, bad spelling, and form-letter prose in all other forms of written communication.

Practice your pitch. Only a small number of those who present well on paper live up to expectations in person. No surprise, really -- interviewing isn't a natural ability but a skill that must be learned and constantly practiced. Few make the effort, which affords those who are more diligent an easy opportunity to stand out.

A good pitch builds on a solid résumé by putting the written information into a richer context that suggests you're not just skilled but culturally and temperamentally appropriate for the job. Beyond that, a good pitch portrays your existing condition -- unemployment -- and the circumstances that led to it in a sympathetic light and then clearly demonstrates that your intended professional direction is compatible with the available position.

Practice is required. Virtually everyone sounds awkward and unsure of him or herself the first few (dozen) times he or she delivers the pitch. So rehearse it over and over, preferably in front of an audience, to achieve a self-assured delivery. And don't think the practice is confined only to the beginning of your search. As you meet people, learn new things, and refine your goals, you'll want to change and strengthen your pitch. Thus, practice should cease only when you actually accept a new position.

Be busy. When you worked, you were constantly engaged and probably complained about the lack of personal time. Now that you have too much, you don't want to waste it watching daytime talk shows or making your lawn the most perfect on the block. Such activities often lead to depression and certainly do nothing to bolster your attractiveness as a job candidate.

The best job seekers find meaningful and enriching ways to spend time beyond job searching. For example, I took a French class, while a friend of mine -- a respected retail executive -- chose to learn photography while he conducted a world-class job search. Other people invest in their future careers directly by taking classes that increase their skills. Still others get meaningfully involved in volunteer work.

Staying busy in a productive way will help you on three crucial fronts. First, it will distract you from your job search in a healthy way. Single-minded focus on something as difficult as job hunting can lead to enormous frustration, so, having another outlet is therefore therapeutic. Second, doing something meaningful can actually enrich your life in ways that job searches, or jobs, often can't. You'll feel better about your life in general.

Finally, busy people present themselves as better candidates. Not only are they more relaxed and confident but they come across as self-motivated, industrious, and maybe even interesting. Most employers find these traits highly attractive.

Look sharp. Working life may not be a beauty contest, but looking your best always helps when interviewing. That doesn't mean you have to invest huge quantities of your savings on a new wardrobe or gym fees. It does suggest that you should take particularly good care of yourself during the search and dress to impress for interviews. Looking good will raise your confidence and go a long way toward making a good first impression, which really does count.

Improving your marketability isn't rocket science or even difficult. Yet, most people don't bother to invest the necessary effort. That's good news if you're one of the few willing to do the right things. You'll have a much easier time standing out and advancing.

Laskoff is the author of *Landing On The Right Side Of Your Ass -- A Survival Guide For The Recently Unemployed*. A graduate of Harvard Business School, he has worked in the investment banking, consulting, and entertainment industries, as well as a number of e-commerce startups. Currently, he operates a Web site at www.askyourass.com.

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