

Learn How to Perform a One-Minute Miracle - Career Fair Strategies from NACE

By Kevin Gray, Associate Editor National Association of Colleges and Employers

You step into the hubbub of the career fair, take a deep breath, and make your way toward a representative from the top-ranked company on your personal list. This is the company you want to work for, and the woman you are approaching is the first gatekeeper.

You make eye contact. Smile. Say “hi.” Your practiced firm handshake follows. And then ... you’re on.

Even though no one yells “Lights, camera, action!” this might be as close to an audition as you will ever come. What can you say and do during the next 60 seconds to make this recruiter want to explore the possibility of hiring you?

Several career services counselors recommend drafting an introduction as a brief “commercial” that allows you to sell yourself. Mark Reed, career counselor at California State University, Hayward, suggests developing an “elevator speech,” a personal presentation just long enough to say to someone in an elevator before they reach their floor. (After all, you never know when or where an opportunity will arise to pitch yourself.)

Follow the Formula

College career counselors and employers alike suggest following a formula for your introduction. According to them, students should provide the following information during their introduction:

Name

Class (senior, junior, sophomore)

Major

Opportunities that you are seeking

Relevant experience (work, internship, volunteer work)

Highlights of skills and strengths

Knowledge of the company

Tailor your introduction to each employer based on good research and knowledge of each company—this will generally impress recruiters. Ted Bouras, director of the Grainger Center for Supply Chain Management at the University of Wisconsin-Madison Business School, says you should articulate how you’ll fit with the company based upon your research.

Do your research before the career fair. A list of employers attending is usually available prior to the event through the career services office. Most companies have Web sites that provide information about their products and services. Other resources such as annual reports, press releases, and newspaper coverage are also very helpful and can usually be found on the Internet or in the library with a little digging.

Ask an Engaging Question

Tracey Cross-Baker, associate director of career services and leadership education at St. Lawrence University, suggests that you end your introduction by asking a focused question that will engage the employer in conversation. Robert Jankouskas, human resources analyst for the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation, said he often remembers students by the questions they ask during career fairs.

Cross-Baker suggests asking: “Could you tell me more about the new (product) you are developing?” or “Could you tell me more about your financial management training program?”

Several things career services counselors and employers say you should avoid doing include:

- Asking what the company does;

- Asking if the company has any jobs; and

- When asked what type of position you are seeking, saying you would be willing to do anything at the company.

- Practice to Perfection

Many career services counselors recommend practicing your introduction. “Winging it” is not a very wise plan of action, especially when a potential job is at stake.

You’ll project confidence and charisma during your introduction if you are comfortable with what you are saying. Remember, the words that you say are just part of your presentation package to potential employers. Your overall manner and confidence are also critical components to the successful introduction. Of course, your confidence and personality should be obvious, but not in an exaggerated or cocky way...just a professional one.

Incorporate positive nonverbal communications, such as eye contact, facial expressions, body language, posture, etc. A mirror, a friend, and/or a career services staff member are all good practice partners. Ask for constructive criticism and try it again. Take the adage “practice doesn’t make perfect; perfect practice makes perfect” to heart.

A solid introduction will help you move on to the important next step—the interview. A poor introduction, however, may put you on a slippery slope to the cutting room floor.

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UNI Career Services

Career Services -102 Gilchrist (319) 273-6857
