

Telephone Interviews

A former sales contact once described a phenomenon called, “selling through the close”, which is a problem common with many professional sales people. They have convinced their customer to make the buy, but oblivious to that, they continue talking and kill the sale. This is prevalent in telephone or inside sales due to the visual disadvantage but also occurs when in person as well. Many of us hate silence and persist in talking until we hear the response we want from our partner. The tension created by the silence can be unbearable but unnecessary talk is a sign of nervousness and desperation.

Recruiters, corporate human resource screeners and hiring executives alike use phone interviews to save time and money. They can “slice through” more candidates and shorten a list of potentials via targeted questions on the phone much faster than in person. Wasting money for plane tickets, rental cars, expensive meals and lodging for questionable fits is not tolerated. Search consultants must document and justify all expenses when submitting them to their clients if they want future business. The pressure is on everyone, yet approaches vary:

- Executive recruiters must determine rapidly if you are an appropriate candidate. A recruiter or research assistant may be calling hundreds of people asking a few targeted questions to see if you possess the “must haves” that place you in their search universe. Impeccable credentials and experience are not enough if you don’t have what they want. This is the first of many “filters” you encounter and may be followed by another phone call to probe deeper, before advancing toward a client meeting.
- Corporate human resources people, while not final decision makers themselves, can end your candidacy if you are rude or impatient with them. They will spend more time on the phone with you than will a third party recruiter, because as insiders they will not only want to check job fit, but will also try to assess your cultural fit. Some executives will ask their administrative assistants and HR people how executive job candidates treated them. If you talk down to them your candidacy ends abruptly without feedback. You must sell corporate insiders at any level to make them your internal advocates. When you hang up from a call with a corporate screener, you want them to recommend that the hiring executive meet with you immediately.
- Senior executives who perform phone interviews possibly have serious interest in you and may want to validate an initial instinct to meet with you before they call the corporate travel people to fly you in. They will be seeking assurance that you fit the job and the culture. Be prepared for a conversation that may range from focused and specific to a casual business discussion.

One leading search industry trainer commented that phone interviews have a thirty per cent chance of converting to a personal meeting. The interviewer has two choices, yes or no, which would indicate fifty per cent odds, but if a company has a field of six or ten candidates and only wishes to meet the top three, the phone interview is a major cut process and is used like a machete. The phone interview, like Email, allows companies to keep everyone distant until few finalists remain.

Here are some recommendations:

- You are a sales representative, trying to sell the services of an executive. Stay focused on your mission convert this to a personal interview.
- Show up on time.
- Do not use a cell phone or an older model cordless phone. Phone interviews deprive you of the advantages of eye contact and body language. Over eighty per cent of the human sensory experience is visual. Don't make it worse by using phone equipment that offers poor fidelity and masks critical voice inflections, emphasis and pauses or worse yet, surprise disconnects.
- Find a quiet place, away from distractions such as television, stereo, pets and family sounds if at home. If you are working with an outplacement provider, use their facilities. Totally focus on your interviewer. Misinterpreting the tone of voice in a question is just as damaging as missing the substance.
- Articulate your value statement briefly but effectively and to the point. Illustrate it with "word pictures" to compensate for the lack of visual contact. Link your achievements directly to metrics that represent revenue enhancements or cost savings, creating strong visual images.
- Be honest. Don't say things that you think the interviewer wants to hear and appear desperate.
- Be upbeat. Many people project themselves poorly on the phone. Complete the entire interview while standing. Speaking while standing tends to facilitate quick thinking and also helps you to project yourself more energetically. Ask a friend to role play and critique your phone communications for tone of voice and clarity. Many of us have no idea how we sound to others. Get feedback from people you trust.
- Avoid rambling to explain experience from the beginning of time. Practice being concise. Practice your ninety-second elevator speeches. Practice stating a brief summary of how you impacted a business and why it was better for you're having worked in it.
- Listen to and answer carefully your interviewer's questions. Amplify answers only when asked.
- Show interest, not desperation, but ask about the next step in the process.
- If the phone interview does not lead to a personal meeting, analyze the call and look for ways to improve your presentation for the next one.

If during a phone interview, an interested client is hedging on buying plane tickets, you may propose a videoconference interview as an interim step. Many companies have videoconference equipment and your outplacement provider may have it as well. Such creative thinking may enhance your candidacy.

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