

How to Ask for – and Get – the Job
If you want to be hired, you must ‘close’ the sale
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As a job seeker, you may view an interview as an interrogation or exchange of information. It's neither. Interviews are sales calls. And, as any sales pro knows, you only get the sale by asking for it.

You aren't begging for a handout when you ask for a job. You're offering prospective employers your experience and ability to contribute to their goals. If employers don't need your skills – or if you can create the need – you'll get the job.

It may surprise you to learn employers like to hear candidates say "I'd like to work here." Dick Stone, a recruiter for Gemplus, a SmartCard manufacturer in Montgomeryville, Pa., says, "I like it when [candidates] give me the feeling they like us. A little flattery goes a long way. Often the missing part in the interview is the commitment from the candidate to the firm."

Sounds easy, but for most job hunters, it isn't. Asking for the job in lieu of silently waiting for an offer is the hardest part. This step is what sales people call "closing" the sale.

Anyone can learn to apply the tricks of the sales trade to a job interview and close a sale. Following these nine steps will help you ask for the job – and get it.

1. Prepare for the interview.

Learn what your prospect needs. Research the employer, formally and informally. If you're answering an advertisement, go beyond its sparse facts to learn as much as you can about the organization.

Determine which of your skills, traits or experiences the employer needs. Then you can tailor your credentials to your research findings.

Plan your interview and rehearse your message. This means converting your skills and experience into terms employers will immediately recognize as useful. If you're confused about your benefit to the organization, the interviewer also will be confused and there won't be a job for you. Make your presentation persuasive and believable.

2. Learn about the interviewer.

When you enter the interview, start by learning everything you can about the interviewer. Forget labels and generalizations that categorize personality types. Concentrate on that particular individual.

Put yourself in his or her shoes. Fear and greed are usually at work. A recruiter is taking a risk in recommending a candidate. The hiring manager is taking a bigger chance in choosing a candidate.

If they make the wrong choice, at minimum, time and money are wasted. At worst, a bad choice could jeopardize the recruiter's or manager's job or even the success of the organization. So it's up to you, the candidate, to show the decision to hire you will be a good one.

If you turn out to be as terrific as you say, you bring success not only to yourself but to the people who hired you. Be positive and present good news. Help the interviewer relax and see you as someone who's going to solve his problems.

3. Use "consultative selling."

The type of selling that works best is called "consultative selling." This isn't high-pressure selling. There's an old saw in sales: "Telling ain't selling, asking is." By asking the right questions, you help the employer come to the inevitable conclusion you're the right choice. You identify the problems and show you're the person to solve them. You learn the organization's weaknesses and demonstrate how you can provide the solution.

This technique can create demand. Many times, it leads to the employer exclaiming, "That's just what we need here!"

4. Motivate yourself.

The desire to close – to ask for and get the offer – is essential. It can be scary to be so bold. Most job hunters aren't used to it, but it can be done with practice. You just have to psych yourself up.

Sell yourself first. Expect success and think lucky, and you'll create desire from within. Get rid of negative thoughts and problems before you enter the interview. Be confident and courageous. It takes audacity to ask for the job.

When Judith Gexlb of Lambertville, N.J., was seeking a job in international sales, she sold herself on the idea she was a hot candidate. Next, she lined up interviews. "The fact that I was in demand made me more appealing to employers and precipitated offers," she says. "They can smell when you're being sought after."

When she had two offers pending, she was up front about it. "I made it clear I had two other offers. The employers got worried about the risk of losing a high-potential candidate," says Ms. Gelb. "They quickly made offers. I controlled my destiny."

Many salespeople take comfort in knowing they can't win them all. And you'll encounter many employers who don't need your talents at this moment. (To put it in salesman's terms, for example: I don't need a car right now. But I do need a computer, so it'll be hard to convince me to buy a car now. Maybe later. Unless you have a really good deal for me now.)

There's a 98% chance of being told "no." However, you have a 2% chance of being told "yes." By following these steps, you'll boost your chance for success. The best thing to do is take a chance and try to close the deal. The probability you'll hear "yes" will be higher than if you don't ask.

5. Know when to close.

When should you try to close? All the time. Keep trying throughout the interview in small ways. These are called "trial closings." For example, when you learn the employer has a problem you've solved in your previous job, explain how you solved it. Then ask, "Would this help you here?" The answer will likely be "yes." Do this whenever the opportunity arises. Hearing "yes" along the way makes it easier and less frightening to ask for a "yes" when the time is right for the big one.

Close whenever the interviewer is ready. Listen for signs of interest, look for body language and sense when there's an opportunity to close. Then ask for the offer.

Some candidates talk so much during interviews that they talk themselves out of a job they've already landed. Or worse, they keep selling after they've made the sale. Then they're dead. Listen and give the interviewer a chance to hire you.

Silence is an amazingly powerful tool in closing. If you don't say anything, the interviewer may feel compelled to fill the void and tell you something vital. Do this discretely. Too many silences can be awkward. Pace yourself with the interviewer.

6. Try these closes.

There are many so-called "closes." Several of them work particularly well in job interviews.

The choice close. This technique is useful when you are setting up an appointment for an interview. Ask, "Is 9:30 a.m. or 2 p.m. better for you?" This presupposes the interviewer will see you. Just asking, "May I come in to see you?" may result in a "no" answer.

It also works when you're asking for the job: "When do I start, Monday or Wednesday?" This may seem aggressive, but it shows you're ready and eager to work for that employer.

Third-party endorsements. When explaining an accomplishment that will help the prospective employer, mention the employer you did it for. "At XYZ company, I..." This gives you credibility and adds the strength of that employer's name to the story. Then ask, "Will this help you solve your problem here, too?"

Assumptive close. This is one of the best closes. You simply talk and act as if you're already working for the interviewer's organization. Use "we" and "us" in your conversation. Describe the situations in which you can see yourself working and accomplishing goals. Become part of the team even before you've been hired. Identify with the interviewer and the organization.

When you follow this strategy, the employer feels more comfortable with you than if he or she has to make a deliberate decision to extend an offer. When you assume you'll get the job, the only question remaining is, "When do I start, Monday or Wednesday?"

A word of caution: Don't appear too eager. You need to maintain your professionalism.

7. Overcome objections.

One stumbling block for many candidates is the inevitable objection: "You're over-/under-qualified, too old/young, etc." There are hundreds of reasons given why candidates aren't right for the job. Many are just excuses or stalls to avoid the risk of hiring someone.

Turn these objections into opportunities to strengthen your candidacy. Acknowledge the objection. "You feel I'm overqualified. That's possible true." Then turn the weakness into a strength: "However, that means I'll start being productive for you that much faster. As I've mentioned, I solved this problem at XYZ company." Make a list of standard objections that apply to you or that you encounter and work out the answers.

Overcoming objections is an art unto itself. The key is to remember that patience and persistence pay off. Don't take no for an answer. Try one more time. The secret to closing is to keep trying.

8. Sum up and ask for the job.

When appropriate, summarize. Say what you have to offer based on your accomplishments. Sales people call these "features." Show how the features will benefit the employer. Keep it simple and brief. Stick to basics. Prepare one dramatic sentence on why you're the person for the job. Remind the interviewer how you've contributed at your previous employer and reiterate how you'll contribute to the success of the prospective one.

9. Confirm the close.

Repeat the terms of the offer as you've discussed it. Ask for clarification of any terms not fully described or understood. Each time you close, ask the interviewer, "Do you have any questions?" When you've been completely clear about how you'll help the employer – then and only then – close.

Be sure to thank the interviewer at the end. Write the words "thank you" in your follow-up letter, too, and repeat the statement of benefits you used to close. Also add the other features and benefits you wished you'd expressed during the interview. The thank-you packs a punch. As Mr. Stone says, "You don't often get thank-you letters. They mean a lot."

Asking for the job intimidates most of us. Fortunately, these techniques can make it easier to close the deal and get the job. Practice these tips and you'll soon grow comfortable with these methods and use them automatically.