

Mind Your Ps & Q: Strategies for Interview Success

By Susan L. Spann

A man about to go on a journey called his servants together and entrusted his possessions to them.

Although Matthew 25 remains silent on the subject of instructions and admonitions, the servants understood their obligation to handle the situation properly—in other words, to “mind their Ps and Qs.”

God grants each individual a share of “talents” to use to advance His kingdom. Well-prepared interview candidates increase these talents with solid performance. Poorly prepared candidates may accidentally bury their talents—and their opportunities—in the ground. Understanding the “Ps and Q” of interviews increases both confidence and competence.

Prayer

“Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness” and the Lord will provide for earthly needs God cares about physical needs as well as spiritual ones. He has a specific will for the life, education, and employment of each individual. Seeking His will through prayer is an integral part of all facets of Christian life, including the college and employment process.

“Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened” (Matthew 7:7-8). Ask God daily for guidance and discernment. Seek to understand and obey His will rather than asking Him to approve a desire for a particular college or career. He will provide the means to perceive and achieve His will as well as the peace that comes from living in accordance with His plan.

Prayer should commence long before a candidate starts scheduling interviews and should continue through and after the interview itself. Constant, focused prayer at the forefront of the interview process helps a Christian remain focused, humble, and under the hand of God.

Preparation

“Also, that the soul be without knowledge, it is not good; and he that hasteth with his feet sinneth” (Proverbs 19:2). Successful candidates acquire knowledge of themselves, their interviewers, and the interview process.

“Know thyself,” in the interview context, means to prepare a résumé and a set of intelligent questions for the interviewer. A strong résumé moves the interview quickly past basic information and establishes a foundation for substantive questions. Find

résumé skills and forms through personal contacts, classes, or the Internet. Proofread the finished product carefully.

Knowledge of the interviewer and the college or company helps a candidate respond to questions appropriately. Obtain brochures and other information about the school or company granting the interview. Talk with current students or employees and use the Internet. If possible, research both the institution and the interviewer. Read available information carefully and write down lists of positive attributes and questions. Interviewers appreciate well-informed candidates whose comments demonstrate this kind of specific understanding and forethought.

Understanding the interview process means studying and practicing interview tactics. Ask friends and relatives to assist with practice interviews. Good practice interviews should closely approximate a real interview in length, location, and substance. A solid résumé will help even an inexperienced mock interviewer ask realistic questions. The interview should not deteriorate into friendly conversation and should conclude with review and discussion of the candidate's appearance, manner, and responses. Honest criticism at the practice stage can prevent serious problems in the real interview.

Precision

Precision counts in appearance, manner, and speech.

Dressing for an interview means dressing professionally even if the interview takes place in a casual setting. Men should wear nicely pressed slacks and a collared shirt with dress shoes. Opt for a suit or a jacket and tie if the interview takes place in a professional setting such as an office or restaurant. Women may wear slacks, skirts, or suits, keeping in mind that professional skirt length is generally no more than two inches above the knee. Clean, neatly groomed hair makes a good impression. Long hair should be tied or pulled back. Keep jewelry to a tasteful minimum.

A good candidate is calm and confident and controls fidgeting. Crossed arms appear hostile or defensive. Nervous candidates may want to place one hand gently on top of the other to prevent unconscious movement.

Precise speech gives credibility. Eliminate "um," "uh," and other verbal space fillers. Interviewers will wait for a thoughtful response. Answer clearly and directly, with precision. Misused words give the impression that a candidate is trying to use vocabulary to disguise a lack of substance.

Questions

Successful candidates understand how to answer questions and when to ask them. Never interrupt the interviewer, even if the question seems clear. Hearing only part of the question or attempting to interpret "what the interviewer really wanted to know" can result in costly mistakes. Pay attention and answer the question asked.

Interviews are conversations. Monosyllabic responses do little to advance the discourse, while verbose dissertations prevent the interviewer from asking follow-up questions or turning to new subjects. Appropriate answers and anecdotes give the interviewer valuable insight into the candidate's history, experience, and personality while maintaining the flow of conversation.

Strong candidates prepare to ask questions as well as answer them. Enter an interview with a mental list of at least five questions for the interviewer: two or three general questions about the school or company and the rest about more specific topics of personal interest. Solid general questions for college interviews include, "What is the rate of attrition between entering freshmen and graduating seniors?" and "What percentage of your students go on to graduate school?" Employment questions might include tactful inquiries about employee retention and promotion procedures.

Performance

Prayer, preparation, and practice create the environment for successful performance. The day before the interview, candidates should assemble the necessary "interview tools": copies of résumés, written directions to the interview location, blue or black pens, and proper identification. Packing these neatly in a briefcase, satchel, or folder prevents loss and demonstrates organization.

Take plenty of time to prepare for the interview. Pray for guidance, direction, and wisdom. Review driving directions carefully and remember to take a contact number for the interviewer in case of emergency. Allow enough travel time. "Traffic" does not excuse tardiness. Plan to arrive ten minutes before the scheduled interview time to complete any necessary paperwork.

Enter the interview with confidence and good posture. Shake hands with the interviewer, smile, and make eye contact. Ask for a business card. Successful candidates often send thank-you letters following an interview, and a business card provides the interviewer's full name and business address. Offer a résumé if the interviewer does not ask for one within the first minute or two. Whether or not the interviewer takes the résumé, a candidate who has one to offer makes a positive impression.

Participate actively and enthusiastically while maintaining a sense of professionalism. Let the interviewer guide the conversation and, like the good and faithful servants of Matthew 25, mind your Ps and Q.

Biographical Information

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