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Home > ScienceCareers Home > Career Development > Previous Issues > 2003 > 2003-03-21 > Jensen

## CAREER DEVELOPMENT : ARTICLES

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### Buying Signals: Paying Attention on Interview Day Makes a Difference

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 21 March 2003

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#### PREVIOUS COLUMNS

In the last couple of months, Tooling Up has presented a wide variety of marketing tips optimized for the scientific job seeker. My previous two articles (see [related links](#)) discussed marketing tips from the corporate world, and David Bomzer's [last column](#) discussed the cover letter as marketing tool. This common ground exists because as career advisors we believe that a successful job search requires salesmanship.

The best interviewers know exactly when to talk and when to listen.

That's right--in today's economy you really have to put yourself out there. To do this successfully requires skills in both marketing and sales. I've found that many technical people think the two words mean the same thing. In actuality, the difference is one of "strategy" vs. "implementation."

Some people, including scientists, love to strategize. Their interview preparation can go on for weeks or months. They fuss over the cover letter, the CV, and even the choice of which ads to respond to. Others minimize the time spent strategizing; they just want to get out there into the job market. They need to feel the excitement or anguish of interviews to believe that they are making progress in their search. It is best, however, to work on both pieces of the puzzle--which is why in this column I'm shifting the focus to the implementation side of the equation.

While most scientists can be good at the strategy of marketing (it isn't much different than planning an experiment), it is this "selling" piece that stops most technical people in their tracks. But take heart ... it may be easier than you think. That's because selling is, to a great extent *listening*; paying attention during the interview can make a huge difference for you in your eventual success.

#### The Ability to Shut Up and Listen

When you get positive signals from your interviewer, you must use those as clues to help you provide more of the same--until the interest grows into a job offer. The best interviewers know exactly when to talk and when to listen.

? Be flexible. Don't try and do the same interview at every company. While you should know your strengths inside out and be prepared to talk about them, listen first to find out what is most important to the employer. In addition, your prospective supervisor will be dealing with his or her own problems. You'll

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need to appeal to those.

? Tailor your presentation to the company's needs. Determine these by a close reading of the job description and by discussion with people on the inside. (Never go on an interview without the full 1- to 2-page job description, which you can generally request through HR. It will be full of additional details that you can use to customize your presentation.)

? Nonverbal buying signals are just as important as what an interviewer says. Is she leaning forward in her chair, maintaining good eye contact with you? (Interested!) Or, is she leaning back, arms crossed, looking at her desk most of the time? (Couldn't care less!)

? One of the best ways to get consistently good interview-day information about the job is to ask open-ended questions. The question, "Do your future plans require any assay-development specialists?" is closed-ended, requiring only a yes or a no response. Instead, ask, "What kind of assay development needs will the company have in the next year or two?" You'll get much more detail out of this open-ended question, allowing you to further customize your interview responses.

? Verbal buying signals include comments like: "That sounds interesting," or "You've got that right. We've had the same issue here." When you hear these comments, give them more--you are on the right track.

Here are two interview scenarios. One of these scientists, Martin, has a difficult time adapting. He's prepared for his interview in a very formal manner, and he's been giving more or less the same interview at each company he visits. He isn't open for a change of direction based upon what he hears or intuits during his day. ...

Martin, a Ph.D. biochemist looking for his first job in industry, felt that the interview had been going fairly well. His scientific seminar had gone without a hitch. As he sat down for his interview with the director of the department, however, he noticed that he felt a lot more uncomfortable. Strange that he would be OK in front of a group and more nervous in the one-on-one, he thought.

The director leaned forward in his chair with good eye contact and asked Martin a fairly easy question, but one that was obviously quite important to him: "Please tell me a bit more about the work you've done with CHO cells, Martin. We're gearing up a program to use CHO cells to express a new therapeutic protein at the lab scale right now."

Martin didn't connect the man's eager body language and the sparkle in his eyes with anything other than a chance for him to talk about what he loves most--protein expression. He spent a moment on the topic of CHO cells, and then went into his interview "pitch" about the work he has done with a Baculovirus protein expression system. Martin was quite proud of this work, and the resulting publication that it had earned. He failed to notice that the director eased back in his chair, lost eye contact, and started to scan the objects on his desk.

The balance of the 45-minute meeting dealt with some of the other high points from his CV. When the meeting ended 15 minutes early, Martin felt a sense of relief.

In the other interview scenario, Janet has left herself open, with a good pair of antennae. She wins the job offer because she's smart enough to reinforce the buying signals when they come. ...

Janet's seminar went OK, but she was concerned when the same scientist asked a couple of tricky questions dealing with a side issue that she'd had problems with during her research. While Janet felt that she had answered this woman's questions, she was a bit anxious when she was introduced to that person as her next interview. It turned out to be Dr. Maibritt Christensen, one of the senior scientists in the lab that Janet would be working in, and a very influential person in the hiring process.

"Janet, that difficulty you mentioned getting your cell line to propagate sounds like something that I've run into in my work. Can you tell me more about how you did those nutritional studies, and what you determined the problem to be?" she asked. It was clear to Janet that this was something that Dr. Christensen was very interested in. She knew from her interviewer's posture and from the repeated questions about this element of her work that it should be the focus of this meeting if she was to gain Dr. Christensen's support for her application.

Janet described the serum-free media that she had fine-tuned for her cell line, and the process that she had gone through to determine the nutritional requirements for her cell line. Although she certainly hadn't planned on going into this much detail on what was only one piece of her work, she was pleased to see that Dr. Christensen showed increasing interest in what she had to say.

"That's what I've discovered as well," her interviewer said, nodding vigorously. Janet knew that she was getting through, even though she had taken an entirely different approach to the interview than what she had planned. Dr. Christensen finally leaned back in her chair, smiled, and said how happy she was to have met Janet. The meeting ended when her interviewer looked at her watch for the first time in the last

hour and realized they were out of time.

### **In Conclusion: You Don't Have to Be a Career Salesperson**

Some people seem born to sell. You know who I mean ... like that reagents salesperson who comes by your laboratory every month who just oozes "salesmanship." But this isn't what we are talking about for interview success. In the job-seeking business, good salesmanship requires listening carefully to the interviewer and reading the interviewer's body language. You must be flexible enough to take what you hear during these meetings and use it to direct your interviewing "pitch."

Remember to watch and listen for buying signals on your next interview!

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