

ADWEEK

Interview Don'ts Six mistakes you may not know you're making

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You may go on interviews out of genuine interest in the position or just to see what's out there. You might even be checking out the competition or trying to gain leverage within your own agency. Regardless of your motivation, remember that the way you present yourself will have an effect that could resonate throughout your career. These are the biggest blunders you can make in the process:

Assume the "I'm-just-going-to-listen" posture: You want to know what's out there, so you accept an interview. You have a job you are reasonably happy with, so you adopt a certain posture. Without realizing it, you are likely to have an air of indifference and even arrogance from the moment you walk through the door. This impression will be hard to shake. If you go on an interview, remember that you're making a lasting impression.

Think you're an automatic "shoe-in": In this economy, agencies—even some of the biggest—are directly calling candidates to recruit for open positions. This seems to give some people the idea they are automatically "in." After all, a major shop called you, didn't it? Unconsciously, your definition of the word "interview" is changed. You're there because they want you. You view the meetings as a chance to be told why you should join the agency. You assume a passive role. You come across at best as aloof, at worst as arrogant.

Show up unprepared: Take responsibility for your active role in the interview process. This is time-consuming—and, in advertising, double the usual amount of work: First there's the agency, then there's the client. Because so much information is accessible on the Internet, your interviewer expects you to know it all: the ins and outs of the agency, its services, its issues, its challenges, and the client's products or services and what it expects from the shop. Learn about the agency people you will meet and the clients you may ultimately interact with.

Your preparation shows your interest in the agency and helps you develop thoughtful questions. Your questions are almost more important than your answers: They show how you think, they demonstrate the depth of your knowledge and insight, and they reveal your priorities.

Strive to be a perfectionist: Be prepared to talk about your imperfections. And I don't mean the "Tell me about your weaknesses" sort of stuff. This is about who you are as a person. People hire people they want to spend time with—and in the ad business, you're likely to spend more time at work than anywhere else. How appealing is a perfect person, really? Think about who you really are and be true to that, flaws and all. If that costs you the job, then it's not the right one for you.

Forget the basics: It is surprising how many people—even those with many years' experience—don't show up on time, dress appropriately, make eye contact, send thank-you notes or follow up on deliverables. Be able to explain the reasons for every job change on your résumé. And be extra-courteous to the receptionist/assistant/intern who brings you into a room or gets you coffee. The interaction shows how you will treat your staff.

Gamble with your reputation: Know when to fold. As you go through each stage—particularly the critical reference round—ask yourself how you would respond to an offer. The process is a two-way street, and there's a tacit agreement that both parties want

to pursue an offer. If you try to play the odds, you risk your reputation. Early on, you probably need more information to make a decision, but when you start to realize the job isn't right, withdraw. You will not be penalized, and it's likely you can later resume contact. But if you're well into the process before bowing out—or, worse, if an offer has been extended—you may brand yourself a "job chaser."

Treat every interview with respect. It's not just about the job. You're presenting yourself to new people and expanding your network. The ad business is smaller than you might think. You never know where the people on the other side of the desk will turn up next—or whom they're meeting for cocktails right after your interview.
