

Master art of telling a good tale

By Amy Lindgren
Knight Ridder Newspapers

Have you ever been tempted to tell a story in a job interview?

Maybe a tall tale, or a real whopper, such as the time you increased the company's revenues by raising the roof and charging passing aircraft a toll for flying through. Or the way you learned to use the computer so well that Bill Gates now calls you for help rebooting. How about the time you improved staff morale so much that everyone decided to have their Thanksgiving dinner at work, to be with their best friends?

Hmmm. Maybe those tales are a little too tall. But they paint a picture, don't they? Compare the stories above to their plain-Jane versions: "I was instrumental in increasing company revenues." "I have learned to use the computer very well." "I know how to boost staff morale."

Ho-hum. The problem isn't with the accomplishments - they're all great. The problem is with the way you relate the accomplishments to the interviewer.

Think about it. If the Interviewer is meeting with five candidates today, he or she is going to hear five times that so-and-so is very good with computers. Have some pity! Brighten the interviewer's day by learning to present your best points in a memorable way. Here are some tips to help you incorporate story-telling into the Interview:

- Identify three or four key points you want the interviewer to remember. These points should be things you do well that also are needed in the jobs for which you are applying. For example, being patient is much more important in a customer-service position than it is in marketing. For the marketing position, you're smarter to emphasize creativity or media contacts.
- Develop a story to illustrate each of the key points. Here's an example: "In my last position, we had a number of customers who couldn't make up their minds about the product. They would place an order and then call and change it the next day. This was costing us a lot of money in change-orders. So I developed a process with my customers where I would call them first, go over the order a second time and answer all their questions again. It took extra time, but it saved money in the long run because we didn't have to repackage the product for those orders, I think patience is an important tool when you're developing relationships with customers. Since your customers are making very difficult decisions, I think being patient will be an asset when I serve them."
- Practice your stories several times before the interview. To make the practice easier, develop a structure for each story that includes a beginning, middle and end. The ending is especially important, because that is where you will draw the conclusion and relate the story to the job at hand.
- Remember the basics, of a good story. Stories should have conflict and a moral. In the example above, the conflict is between filling the order quickly and serving the customer's desire to change the order. The moral in this case was to slow the process and make the customer feel valued. A really good story also will have humor or another human emotion. For example, the story above could be expanded: "We had a customer who changed orders so many times in one week that we started an office pool to bet when she would close the deal. The winner won a bag of popcorn from the cafeteria. It was funny, but you know it was also expensive to the company. That's why I developed a process."
- Don't overuse story-telling. In any interview, one story is good and three stories are more than enough. Even though you have several stories prepared, be careful to select just the right one or two for the situation.

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