

Tell Me About Yourself

By Adam Cantor

When an interviewer asked Jim, a systems architect, to “tell me about yourself,” he was eager and felt prepared to answer. After all, he’d been an IT and business professional for more than two decades and could recap his career highlights at length and with gusto.

This was simply far too much information.

The candidate was only halfway through his lengthy chronological explanation of his work history when the interviewer interrupted him to ask another question. Jim was disgruntled that he did not have an opportunity to describe several of his other important accomplishments and accolades. If an interviewer brings up this common but often misunderstood question, understand that responding is often more complex than you might believe. The following tips can help you construct a concise and successful answer.

1. The “Elevator Pitch”

The inquiry, “Tell me about yourself,” is not a request for your life story. What the interviewer really wants to know is, “Why should I choose you over the next candidate?” With this in mind, your objective is to devise a brief, yet focused summary of what will make the interviewer want to know more about you and what you can do for the company.

Essentially, you are pitching yourself to the employer, much as a salesman must do for prospective clients. This is commonly referred to as the “elevator pitch”. If it cannot be delivered within the few short moments that it takes to ride an elevator a few floors with someone, it is simply too long. Providing the interviewer with a short and succinct answer will coax the employer into asking additional questions for clarification.

To prepare, you must develop a response tailored to the specific employer and addressing the firm’s interests, goals, and needs. You should revise, refine and rehearse your script until you can deliver it flawlessly -- with energy, enthusiasm and confidence.

2. Highlight what you can bring to the employer.

The search for a new job has one underlying tone no matter what industry you are in or what firm you interview for- sell yourself. In an interview, you are the product and you must convince this person in front of you to make a purchase (hire you). In light of this, orient any discussion of your capabilities and previous experiences towards the opportunity at hand.

3. The Closing

If your interviewer seems bored or distracted, it’s a clear indication that it is time to return the spot light. This allows the interviewer to change the flow of communication and establishes a two-way dialogue.

If the interviewer remains attentive, you will have more latitude in how you wrap up. The best way to close is to put the conversational ball in the interviewer’s court by saying why you’re interested in the company and position or by asking for more information about the firm’s current needs. Listen attentively to the response to determine what parts of your experience and accomplishments to mention as the interview progresses.