

INSIGHTS ON WINNING THE INTERVIEW

Presented to Midcoast Commerce Connection

November 17, 2009

**Presented by Charles J. Martin
Writer, Editor**

**136 Washington Street
Bath, ME 04340
207.443.9414**

cjmartin@suscom-maine.net

Architects, engineers, contractors, lawyers, insurance agents, accountants, surveyors, bankers, military officers, government officials, social workers and others often need to write formal proposals to compete for a job or a grant award. Putting together a great proposal is a key step in the process, but it is only one step. It must be good enough to make it to the short list for interviews. In the final analysis, it is the interview that wins (or loses) the assignment or the grant award.

PREPARATIONS BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

- Whenever possible, talk with the key person to find out as much as you can. Try to be last on the interview schedule.
- Find out who is on the interview committee and what they are looking for. Learn as much as possible about the interview team members... their viewpoints, prejudices, philosophy, etc. Talk to them if allowed.
- Whenever possible, visit the interview room to see the setup...electrical outlets, windows, screens, seating arrangements etc.
- Test all audio visual equipment.
- Bring extension cords, duct tape, scissors, etc.

PREPARING AND PRACTICING FOR THE INTERVIEW

- Review your proposal and stick to the theme that got you to the short list.
- The theme should highlight benefits to the owner and solve owner's problems.
- Pick an interview team that is good at interviews, but be sure to include those who will be working on the project.
- Make sure the project manager or key person does most of the talking.
- Beware of letting a principal of the firm take over the interview. The committee wants to hear from the person who will be working on the project, not the president of the firm whom they will never see again.
- If your staff needs help in presentation skills, spend the money on some good training sessions.
- If your proposal includes another firm as part of the project, make sure they are part of the interview. **Do not meet them for the first time at the interview!**
- **Practice, practice, practice...before an audience that can give constructive feedback.**
- **No first-time rehearsals in the car on the way to the interview!**

CONDUCTING AND WINNING THE INTERVIEW

- Don't rehash your qualifications. The selection committee already knows you are qualified. That's why you've made it to the interview.
- Give them a reason to select you. Describe your approach and show how it will benefit them.
- Do not use the "standard interview format" used by all other firms:
 - Principal... "We're happy to be here, blah, blah, blah..."
 - Principal describes history of the firm and shows pictures of too many projects. Some of them are not relevant!
 - Approach...each team member describes what they are going to do.
 - Principal..."We'd love to work with you...any questions?"

CONDUCTING AND WINNING THE INTERVIEW, cont:

- Avoid using “presentation speak,” i.e. the words and phrases used by all other firms:
 - “I’m delighted to be here...”
 - “Thank you, my name is ...”
 - “I’m from XYZ Company, and I’m here to....”
 - “It’s a pleasure to present our qualifications for...”
- Using “presentation speak” is just as bad as starting off a cover letter to a proposal saying, “We are happy to present our proposal in response to your RFP for blah, blah, blah.
- Keep the presentation conversational.
- If using audio-visuals, make them relevant. Do not show pictures of your bridge projects at an interview for a school project!

AN EXAMPLE OF A CREATIVE APPROACH TO AN INTERVIEW

Here is an example of a dynamic and creative approach to a formal presentation. The project is the design of a new football stadium for a major college or university. The selection committee consists of the college president, the football coach, the athletic director and the head of the alumni association. None of them knows anything about the design of football stadiums!

The other two firms on the short list have already bored them to death with presentations that are so similar they can not remember one firm from the other.

The winning firm opens its presentation as follows: “Football ... (pause) ... football is a game of individual effort and coordinated teamwork.” They have already captured the full attention of the selection committee!

THE QUESTION OF HAND-OUTS...BEFORE OR AFTER

Prepare a nicely bound 3 or 4-page summary or outline of the presentation. The big question is whether to hand it out before or after the interview.

- **Before:** The hand-out may provide a good place for the committee to take notes. On the other hand, they may read it and not pay attention!
- **After:** I favor this approach because it gives the committee a summary of your presentation to use when they are in deliberations.

DEBRIEFINGS

- **Before the interview:**
 - It's a good way to gain insights on the selection process.
 - What are they looking for?
 - Who is on the selection team?
 - What are their backgrounds?
 - Is it O.K. to talk with them before the interview?
- **After the interview, but before a selection is made:**
 - Call to see about the schedule for making a decision.
 - Ask if they need any other information.
- **After winning an interview:**
 - What worked for us?
 - How were the others eliminated?
- **After losing an interview:**
 - Resist the temptation to make another presentation!
 - How did we do?
 - Where do we need improvement?
 - What won it for the selected firm?
 - Ask if you can look at the other proposals.

ACT ON THE INFORMATION GAINED IN DEBRIEFINGS:

- If your firm needs training in presentation skills, get it!
- If the other proposals look snappier with great graphics, hire a graphic designer or whatever it takes to make your proposals eye-catching and easier to read.