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Career Advice

From Marc Cenedella

APRIL 16, 2012



What if you were able to walk into an interview and explain persuasively why you'd like to work at that company? Don't you think you'd have a leg up on the competition?

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[Career Advice Home](#) >> [Interviewing](#) > How to Answer the 'Tell Me About Yourself' Interview Question

Interviewing

How to Answer the 'Tell Me About Yourself' Interview Question

Don't be afraid of this question; instead use it as an opportunity to position yourself for success.

SEPTEMBER 22, 2009

By Lee E. Miller

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When I was a human resources executive doing hiring interviews, I almost always began my interviews with candidates by requesting, "Tell me about yourself." I did that for a number of reasons, the most important of which was to see how the candidates handled themselves in an unstructured situation.

I wanted to see how articulate they were, how confident they were and generally what type of impression they would make on the people with whom they came into contact on the job.

I also wanted to get a sense of what they thought was important.

Most candidates find this question to be a particularly difficult one to answer. That is a misplaced view. This question offers an opportunity to describe yourself positively and focus the interview on your strengths. Be prepared to deal with it. These days, it's unavoidable. Like me, most interviewers start off their interviews with this question. A lot of interviewers open with it as an icebreaker or because they're still getting organized, but they all use it to get a sense of whom you are.

The Wrong Response

There are many ways to respond to this question correctly and just one wrong way: by asking, "What do you want to know?" That tells me you have not prepared properly for the interview and are likely to be equally unprepared on the job. You need to develop a good answer to this question, practice it and be able to deliver it with poise and confidence.

The Right Response

To help you prepare, I spoke to a number of career coaches on how best to respond when faced with this question. Heed the [career advice](#) that follows to ace this opener:

The consensus of the coaches with whom I spoke:

- Focus on what most interests the interviewer
- Highlight your most important accomplishments

Focus on What Interests the Interviewer

According to Jane Cranston, a career coach from New York, "The biggest mistake people being interviewed make is thinking the interviewer really wants to know about them as a person.



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They start saying things like, 'Well, I was born in Hoboken, and when I was three we moved ...' Wrong. The interviewer wants to know that you can do the job, that you fit into the team, what you have accomplished in your prior positions and how can you help the organization."

Nancy Fox, of Fox Coaching Associates, agrees. She notes that "many candidates, unprepared for the question, skewer themselves by rambling, recapping their life story, delving into ancient work history or personal matters." She recommends starting with your most recent employment and explaining why you are well qualified for the position. According to Fox, the key to all successful interviewing is to match your qualifications to what the interviewer is looking for. "In other words, you want to be selling what the buyer is buying."

Think of your response as a movie preview, says Melanie Szlucha, a coach with Red Inc. "The movie preview always relates to the movie you're about to see. You never see a movie preview for an animated flick when you're there to see a slasher movie. So the 'tell me about yourself' answer needs to directly fit the concerns of your prospective employer."

Previews are also short but show clips of the movie that people would want to see more of later. They provide enough information about the movie so that you could ask intelligent questions about what the movie is about. Hiring managers don't want to look unprepared by reading your resume in front of you, so Szlucha advises that you "provide them some topics to ask you more questions about."

Highlight Your Most Important Accomplishments

Greg Maka, managing director at 24/7 Marketing, advises job seekers to "tell a memorable story about your attributes." For example, if you tell an interviewer that people describe you as tenacious, provide a brief story that shows how you have been tenacious in achieving your goals. "Stories are powerful and are what people remember most," he said.

One great example is that of [Fran Capo](#), a comedienne who bills herself as "the world's fastest-talking female." She offers the following advice: "Whenever I go on auditions or interviews, I have a "set" opening I use. ... I tell the interviewer what I do in one sentence and then say, 'And I also happen to be the Guinness Book of World Records' fastest-talking female.' Then I elaborate." According to Capo, the main thing in anything you do is to be memorable, in a good way. Your goal when you answer the 'tell me about yourself' question is to find a way stand out from everyone else.

And, Be Brief

Maureen Anderson, host of "The Career Clinic" radio show, stresses the importance of keeping your answer short: "The employer wants to know a *little* bit about you to begin with — not your life story. Just offer up two or three things that are interesting — and useful. You should take about a minute to answer this question."

To make sure it is succinct and covers what you want it to cover, she suggests that you "write your answer out before the interview, practice it, time it and rehearse it until it sounds natural. Then practice it some more. The goal is to tell the employer enough to pique their interest, not so much that they wonder if they'd ever be able to shut you up during a coffee break at the office."

Rather than dread this question, a well-prepared candidate should welcome this inquiry. Properly answered, this question puts the candidate in the driver's seat. It gives her an opportunity to sell herself. It allows her to set the tone and direction for the rest of the interview, setting her up to answer the questions she most wants to answer.

Lee E. Miller is managing director of NegotiationPlus.com and an adjunct professor at Columbia University, New York. He is a career coach, corporate trainer, negotiating strategist and professional speaker. He is the author of Get More Money on Your Next Job ... In Any Economy (McGraw Hill, 2009) and A Woman's Guide to Successful Negotiating (McGraw Hill, 2010), which he

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cowrote with Jessica Miller, his eldest daughter. You can contact Lee at Lee@YourCareerDoctors.com

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