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Interviewers can use the opportunity to tout the brand

Association executives who interact with job applicants should be thinking of themselves as "brand ambassadors," experts say.

June 11, 2010

By Mark Tarallo

The interview process is a two-way street. While the interviewer is assessing applicants, they, in turn, are sizing up the organization.

"Candidates ask going in, 'Why should I work for this trade association?'" says David Litherland, employment expert with search firm Summit Search Group BC, based in Vancouver. Association executives who conduct interviews should think of themselves as "brand ambassadors," and use the process to impress on the applicant how dynamic and accomplished the group actually is, Litherland says.

But that's not the way it always works. At his search firm, Litherland has arranged countless interviews, and allows client organizations to use his office as an interview site. On too many occasions, he says, the interviewer's attitude and demeanor does not reflect well on the organization.

"They are lifeless. It's as if they're bored with the job, that they've been there too long," Litherland said. "They're stale."

Sometimes, he added, the interviewer simply lists the duties and responsibilities of the position, and then focuses on time-worn interview questions (e.g., what are your strengths and weaknesses) without conveying anything positive about the organization.

"The [candidate] walks out thinking, 'What was that?'" Litherland said.

Put the position in context

The concept of interviewer as someone who positively reflects the "brand" is one that resonates with William "Woody" Sutton, the long-time military official and association executive, recently named CEO of the Equipment Leasing and Finance Association.

Senior board members who interview potential CEOs are usually the "best sales force" an association can have, according to Sutton, former CEO of the Air-Conditioning and Refrigeration Institute.

But other association managers, such as such as division heads, usually conduct the interviews for a range of staff positions. In those cases—much more common than a CEO interview—Sutton said he makes sure the interviewer understands not only the responsibilities of the position in question, but what role the position plays in the larger purpose of the association.

Discussing that role gives the interviewer a perfect opportunity to highlight the association's mission, he added.

"You can explain what it's all about," Sutton said. "In effect, you are presenting the brand."

To this end, Sutton recommends opening up the "members only" section of the association's web site to an interviewee as an effective communication tool.

Potential for social media backlash

According to Litherland, interviews that reflect poorly on the association's image are potentially more costly than ever before in the current age of widespread social media use.

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Active users of Facebook may post their expectation of an upcoming interview, creating an audience of friends who will inquire afterward. A bad experience can lead to an after-interview post sharply critical of the association, which could be read by hundreds of the applicant's Facebook friends. (Senior managers unaware of the popularity of Facebook among 30- and 40-something professionals ignore this possibility at their peril, he said.)

Similarly, Twitter users may send out an association-blasting Tweet that becomes part of the public, and searchable, Twitter feed.

Prompt communication after an interview, even to say that no decision has yet been made, helps polish the association's image as a well-run group, Litherland said.

By way of a counter-example, he spoke of a recent situation in which his office served as the interview site for a client organization interviewing seven candidates in one day. Three weeks after the interview, there was still no feedback from the organization—a potentially brand-damaging oversight in the eyes of seven qualified professionals.

"It's not mental telepathy," he said. "It's a simple phone call."

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NEWS

Brand-building interview strategies

June 11, 2011

David Litherland, of executive search firm Summit Search Group BC, offers these suggestions designed to help interviewers protect and even burnish an organization's brand when interviewing:

- Talk about the association's key initiatives and accomplishments, even if they do not directly involve the position in question.
- Sketch out the group's vision for the future. Convey the excitement of the organization's ambitions.
- Refrain from complaints (e.g., "this is the fifth interview I've conducted today, and I'm just exhausted") or any remarks that indicate you would rather not be doing the interviewing.
- Be mindful not to project arrogance, or an air of superiority. Treat all applicants with the same respect with which you would treat clients.
- Don't belittle a resume entry, or mock any other organization, even competing groups (e.g., "how could you have worked at a place like that?").
- For planning purposes, hour-long interviews can be broken into 10- or 15-minute blocks. Go in with a schedule, and be cognizant of the applicant's time.
- Make an effort to "sell the brand" even if it becomes clear early in the interview that the candidate is not right for the job. He or she might be inspired to apply at a later date for a job with a better fit.

Related article: Interviewers can use the opportunity to tout the brand

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