



# Bluestone's Retail Strategies

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## *Interviewing: How and What to Ask*

**L**et me set the scene: Two people face each other across a table. One person is there to ask questions in a relentless pursuit of the truth. The other tries to answer those questions in a way that will please the asker, often regardless of the truth.

This might sound like an interrogation from *NYPD Blue*, but I'm talking about interviewing a job applicant. Nothing influences the success of a business more than its people.

And the quality of a staff starts with who gets hired. Often we base hiring decisions on information that we receive by asking questions of a job applicant. By listening carefully to what people say, as well as to what they don't say, we can make good decisions that create the best possible chance of a good hire. Here are several basic rules that almost always yield enough information to make a good hiring decision.

### **Basic Rules of Interviewing:**

*1) Conduct the interview at a prescribed time in a private place where you will not be interrupted.*

Set a specific time instead of having someone "come by," so you will know if they are punctual. Hold interviews at your store before opening, after closing, or when someone else can assist customers. You might hold interviews in restaurants or other similar venues. Make sure there is reasonable privacy and few distractions.

*2) Have a list of questions that you always ask.*

Develop these over time, based on your experience. In addition, be aware of laws governing questions that you cannot ask. A partial list of "must asks" are:

- Tell me about yourself and your work experience. (Ask this no matter how excruciating the answer may be. It will offer insight.)
- What interests you in the framing business?
- Why are you interested in our company?
- What skills and abilities would you bring?
- What are your greatest strengths as a framer/designer/salesperson?
- In what area do you feel you can improve?
- We check references carefully. What are your previous employers likely to say about you?
- How do you like to be treated by a supervisor? Have you been treated unfairly in the past?
- Scenario questions (What would you do if... ?)

*3) Ask Open Ended Questions.* Ask what you want to know and then be quiet. In many cases, an applicant will just keep talking. Much can be learned from their monologues. Don't signal the answer you are looking for. Let them speak their mind.

*4) Ask Innovative Questions.* Some people have been through dozens of interviews. Ask questions they haven't heard before and you will get more insightful answers. For example, "When we check your references, is there anything negative that will come up that you would like to explain now?"

*5) If you want to know something, ask.* Other than legally restricted topics, feel free to ask any question that relates to the person's ability to do the job. For example, the person's current pay

rate is a question you can, and should, ask. Determine their ability to work with fractions and their likelihood of staying for a while if they like their job.

- 6) **Be objective.** Don't start liking the person until after they start working for you.
- 7) **Trust your instincts.** If a person seems odd, they probably are. If a person seems flawed, they probably are. If there is just something not quite right, don't continue. You are under no obligation to hire a person just because you offer them an interview, or to explain to them in any detail if you choose not to hire them. If something doesn't feel right, punt!

### Phases of Interviewing

The interview process has several clearly defined phases: Introduction or "getting to know you;" Previous experience and job related talent; Informational; Questions and answers; Demonstration; and Conclusion. Each phase gives you the opportunity to formulate conclusions regarding the applicant. If "warnings" are present, you should note them carefully and consider ending the interview prematurely.

#### Introduction or "Getting To Know You"

**Your Goal:** To gain a general understanding of the applicant. **Look For:** Dress. Demeanor. Social and conversational skills. Energy level. Interest in our industry. **Warning Signs:** Inappropriate dress. Casual or distant attitude towards interview. Poor command of language. Socially inept conversation. Low energy or excessively "laid back" attitude. No real interest in framing ("just needs a job"). Did not bring resume, paper or pen.

#### Previous Experience and Job Related Talent

**Your Goal:** To learn about the applicant's work experience and relations with supervisors. To determine what skills and talents the applicant possesses and how that relates to the open position. This is where you ask many of the questions that will provide you with information to make a decision. **Look For:** Number of previous jobs held. Average duration of previous employment. Reasons for separation from previous employment. Salary experience at previous employment. Skills possessed by applicant. Career interests, expectations, and pay requirements. **Warning Signs:** Short duration at previous jobs. Long gaps between jobs. Excessively negative impressions of previous employers. Being terminated but "not knowing why." "Puffed" or overstated skills and abilities relative to position being sought or previ-

ous positions held. Interests, expectations, or pay requirements that are unrealistic within your company.

#### Informational

**Your Goal:** To inform the applicant of the tasks that they would be expected to perform in the job. To "sell" your company and the position to the applicant. To advise the applicant of benefits available to them as well as pertinent rules and policies that they may need to know at this stage. **Warning Signs:** Lack of interest. Assumes he/she has the job already. Asks for exceptions to rules or tries to negotiate prematurely.

#### Questions and Answers

**Your Goal:** To answer any questions the applicant might have. **Warning Signs:** Applicant does not have any questions, or questions indicate that he/she failed to comprehend topics discussed.

#### Demonstration

**Your Goal:** To determine if skills claimed by the applicant are real. We do not have to rely on the applicant's word alone that their framing, design, or sales skills are as they claim. We can, and should, ask applicants to *show us* the skills they claim to have. If they are great at multiple mats, point them towards the mat cutter and say, "show me!" If they are great designers or salespeople, do a role play with a piece of art. **Look For:** Properly performs tasks "as advertised." **Warning Signs:** Skills are not as claimed. Excuses for poor performance.

#### Conclusion

At the end of an interview, it is helpful to bring some level of clarity to the applicant's likelihood of being offered a job. In return for the time they invested in meeting with you, it is only fair to be honest with them.

- **Dismissal:** If you know that the person is unsuited for the position, simply thank them for their time and send them on their way knowing that they won't be hearing from you. They will know where they stand and you have established closure so that you won't be getting any phone calls in the coming days.
- **Second Interview:** You may have the desire to bring the applicant back so that a partner, staff member, or trusted advisor can meet them. Arrange a time or tell the applicant when they should expect to hear from you.
- **Decision Pending:** Are you not sure? Do you still have other applicants to talk to? Tell them the truth and advise them when they should expect to hear from you.

- **Future Reference:** Do you like the person for a job but find that you are unable to offer them a position at this time? Ask permission to keep their information on file and to call them should a position open up. This way, you can develop a file of qualified applicants for future needs. Then, even if they are working elsewhere, you can call them at home to see if they are interested in a change.

- **Job Offer:** There are times when it feels right to make an immediate offer. In this case, that would be a good conclusion to the interview, or perhaps a reason to meet again in the next several days.

*Tip:* While you may want to be very slow and deliberate in hiring, keep in mind that your applicants have rent and other bills to pay. They need work *today* and will be out looking for work until you call them.

### **Another Word on Job Offers**

Regardless of your company's size, make job offers in writing. Typically, it would contain the following: pay rate being offered, benefits being offered, and when they begin, date of first performance evaluation and date of eligibility for a pay increase, statement that employment is "at will" (no contract).

There are few things worse than being told by an employee that you made a promise that you know you did not. If the entire agreement is in writing, there can be no confusion.

Do you have any favorite interview questions or strategies? I'd love to hear them. Write to me at [bluestone@framegroup.net](mailto:bluestone@framegroup.net). ■