Here’s some inside advice to help you prepare for your interview.

INTERVIEW DO’S
1. Visit the company’s website to get a sense of its products, services, and marketplace.
2. Spend time rehearsing “tell me about yourself” Employers ask this question 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.

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.

**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.

3. Make a list of questions you’d like answered at the interview, and bring this list with you. Candidates who don’t ask questions about the department, the company, their peers, their near- and longer-term
responsibilities, the tools they’ll use, and so on, generally do not appear interested in the job and are seldom offered it.

4. If you’re interviewing for a position that leverages several of your demonstrated strengths and are confident that you both understand and possess the core skills to do the job, we recommend preparing a short verbal spiel that summarizes your accomplishments relative to (your understanding of) the job’s requirements. If you can—in no more than three minutes—tell an interviewer who you are, what you’ve done that’s relevant to what you think they need, and where you’d like to make a contribution, you’ve done their job for them. They’ll appreciate that!

Here’s the reason: most interviewers don’t scrutinize your resume before they meet you and don’t know what questions to ask. If you can frame the discussion on your terms (without becoming pushy or arrogant), you’re almost certain not only to relieve their anxiety but to earn their gratitude and gain their trust.

All you need do—once you feel you have a good understanding of the interviewer’s requirements—is to offer to summarize your resume for them. How many people will say ‘no thanks, I’ve already got 30 minutes’ worth of questions for you’? Suddenly, you’ve got control of the interview. Now all you do is tell them:

• What you imagine they need done and what kind of skills you believe the right candidate must have to succeed,
• What you’ve done—and, just as importantly—what you hope to do (that’s relevant to their needs), and
• Emphasize your strengths and how complementary they are to (your understanding of) the company’s goals

If you can show passion, together with humility and calm self-confidence, the worst the interviewer will do is correct your understanding of the position’s requirements—giving you an opportunity to re-address them specifically. (Of course, if you are highly-judgmental and unalterably opinionated with regard to your skills being more valuable than the ones necessary for the job, it’ll be a very short interview…)

The danger of not framing the interview on your terms—that is, of ceding control of the interview—is that many interviewers are poor communicators and are anxious about evaluating your credentials. They therefore display the classic ‘fear what you do not understand’ response. Because they don’t understand your role or abilities and do not know how to find common ground, they’ll retreat, turn off their imaginations and any sense of empathy they might otherwise have felt, and start looking for the flaw that convinces them that you don’t understand them and are therefore unworthy to join their team.

Think about this for a moment—wouldn’t you do the same thing if you were interviewing?

Regardless of whether you take our advice and frame the interview to reflect well on your accomplishments, your job in the interview is to address your interviewers’ apprehension. In order to pass muster, you must help them understand what you can do to make them look good, and how you’ve succeeded in similar situations in the past. Anticipate their concerns so as to make it unnecessary for them to ask.

5. Get plenty of sleep before your interview.

If an interviewer perceives that you’re inattentive, they won’t ask you why—they’ll just assume that you’re bored. For interviewers, perception is reality.

6. Bring at least two (2) clean copies of your resume, and arrive early to the interview.

Some companies require you to fill out an application form before the interview, so be at least 10 minutes early. With most application forms, you needn’t answer all the company’s questions—just attach a copy of your resume, and fill in the missing information. If the application form asks for your salary history and you choose to omit that information, just write in “call” (or something similar) to
indicate that you didn’t ignore the instructions but instead wish to discuss those details in confidence and after you’ve learned more about the position.

7. Dress up. It’s seldom appropriate for women to wear heels and hose for anything but the first interview, but it’s worth proving that you can (at least once). In general, you won’t draw the wrong kind of attention to yourself if you wear conservative (and matching or complementary) colors, unprovocative styles, minimal makeup, and low heels. Interviews are the wrong place to make a fashion statement or demonstrate the ‘expressiveness’ of your wardrobe, so please leave the purple pantsuit with matching beret at home. At the very least, men should wear a clean, unwrinkled, unlogo’d shirt with a collar, pants (not shorts or jeans) that have a discernible crease, and relatively well-cared-for leather shoes (not sandals, boots, or cross-trainers). For a first interview, a sports jacket and tie are entirely appropriate, but a three-piece suit is overkill.

If you need to keep your interviews a secret from your current employer or client, change clothes enroute to or from the interview. Hotels, banks, clothing stores, and even (selected) gas stations have rest- or changing rooms with mirrors so that you can transform your appearance as desired.

Engage your audience. Make steady eye contact, especially when you’re speaking. Uncross your legs and arms, and turn your body to face your interviewer. Smile. Show some passion— people trust passion. Pay close attention to what your interviewers say. Answer their questions clearly and succinctly, then ask if they’d like more information. Anticipate their concerns and address them concisely. Give examples that prove your points. Share personal opinions only when they’re relevant.

Even when your interviewer is entranced in a monologue, make it a dialog— volunteer evidence of your interest, understanding, sympathy, and experience. Interspersed comments such as “Boy, I’ve been there”, “That sounds really interesting,” “I’d love to be involved with that kind of a project,” or “I’m sure I could help improve that situation” usually leave the interviewer with a positive impression of your abilities and interests. Sometimes simply nodding and giving the occasional “uh-huh” is enough to show your enthusiasm and awareness.

8. Always ask questions that demonstrate your familiarity with and interest in the subject being discussed. An interested but under-qualified candidate will be hired almost as readily as a qualified but passive one.

9. Ask your interviewers for their business cards. Even if you’re not sure you want to work there, send each interviewer a note to thank them for their time and interest in your services, as well as for sharing their perspectives.

It’s a very small world, and you or your resume will likely cross these interviewers’ paths again. You can only improve your chances of being hired (now and in the future) if you show courtesy, interest, and enthusiasm.

Interview Don’ts

1. Don’t be late.
2. Don’t criticize former colleagues, employers, or clients. Badmouthing almost always backfires on the badmouther. At the very least, it proves that you can’t be trusted not to disparage your peers and managers in the future.
3. Don’t forget your portfolio. Unless this is a second- or third-round interview and you know you won’t be speaking with anyone you’ve not already met, don’t even think about showing up without past examples of your work. This rule does not apply to entry-level positions and professions that don’t foster portfolio growth, such as retail or administrative positions.
4. Don’t dress for failure. Show your prospective employer that you are willing to make an effort to impress— and that you know that appearances count. You’ll never lose points for being better dressed than your interviewer, especially on a first-round interview.
5. Don’t just sit there. Don’t yawn, look bored, or look at your watch. Don’t let your answers ramble or wander off topic. And don’t blame, judge, or let yourself become defensive.

6. If asked a question about an area in which you have experience, don’t change your opinion halfway through a response. It inspires infinitely more confidence in your skills if you disagree politely with the interviewer’s opinion. Reconsidering an answer, unless the interviewer changes the parameters of the question, will be taken as evidence that you lack authority and aren’t the expert they expected. (An added bonus is that you get to see how the interviewer deals with conflict.)

7. Don’t discuss money. Interviews are stressful—even when they go well—and the hiring manager’s job is to balance your potential contribution with the cost of your services. Most will ask you “what’s your rate?” or “what kind of salary are you looking for?” before you’ve had the chance to inform yourself about:

- the value of the total compensation package—which for staff opportunities may include raises, bonuses (sign-on and performance-related), training, subsidized education, stock options, vacation time (and even sabbaticals), as well as insurance (medical, dental, vision, and so on) and retirement plans
- the compensation available at similar companies for similar opportunities
- your qualifications relative to other candidates the hiring manager has interviewed (which may or may not correlate with the hiring manager’s level of interest in those candidates)

Answering the “how much?” question with a specific number or too narrow a range will almost always work against you. Shoot high and the hiring manager may think you unrealistic and insatiable. Aim low and you’ll undermine your ability to negotiate more later on.

When asked about your expected compensation, try replying with one or more of the following:

“I really haven’t thought about it yet—the reason I was interested in the position is because of its location / responsibilities / industry. Now that I’ve met with you and your team, I’m even more interested, although money is certainly a factor. What do you think would be fair for someone with my experience and abilities?”

“I know the maximum rate/salary listed in the job description, and I know the compensation available from other companies to which I’ve applied (or with which I’ve interviewed), but I need to educate myself more completely about this opportunity and at least think about it overnight before I can give you an appropriate number.”

“Money’s not my only consideration, but maybe it’ll help you to know that I’ve been interviewing for positions in the range of $X to $Y. I think my skills are worth a lot more than I’m currently making to the right company, but I can be pragmatic if nonmonetary factors make an offer compelling.”

“Let me answer that by asking you a question: “If I were hired and then, later on, found out I was making too little or received an (unsolicited) offer from a similar company to do identical work, would I be granted a raise?” Most hiring managers will answer ‘no’. Then you say, “I didn’t think so. And I’d hate for either of us to be in that situation—which is why it makes sense for me to do some more homework before I give you an answer.”

In summary, being asked for ‘your price’ always results in a high-stakes game of chicken. It’s a test of your character as well as of how well-prepared you are. You can keep your cool and respond sensibly, or you can lose it—either getting lost in self-doubt and selling out for too little, or getting lost in ego and appearing greedy.

A word of warning to those prone to the latter course: greed will almost always work against you—even if you’re hired, you’ll be resented. Don’t make the mistake of assuming that a company’s interest in making you an offer automatically means that it’s willing to pay you the maximum advertised price. Unless you are perfect for the job in every way possible, you’ll find that humility pays serious dividends. Don’t let down your guard. It’s a bad idea to get too familiar with interviewers, even if “everything went really well” and you’re just chatting with your potential colleague or manager in the lobby, on the phone, or by email. Careless interviewees often lose jobs they wanted and for which they were well-
qualified because they sent the company overconfident or otherwise upsetting signals—an arrogant remark, a typo-ridden note, a disparaging comment about a colleague, manager, or even a political figure, an intolerant opinion or bias, expletive-laced voicemail, inappropriate ad-hominem criticisms, or unreasonable compensation demands.