

How to Get the Most Out of Career Fairs – Tips From Recruiters

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You've heard enough from enough people to know that you probably should attend this year's campus career fairs. You go to the career services office at your school, read the information, and decide that hundreds of major employers in one location is a good thing. You decide to attend. You print 30 copies of your resume, you practice your handshake, and you press your interview suit. Now what? Here are a few pointers gleaned from recruiters who attend career fairs. Listen up!

1. Before printing multiple copies of your resume, have others proofread it for typos. Recruiters hate those! We'll question your work ethic if you hand in a poorly written resume filled with mistakes. Also, don't use "creative" fonts or cram all your numerous awards and association memberships in a type size that is too small for the naked eye. Remember, substance is the key. We know what we're looking for. Your job at this point is to get through our first round of screening. For that, you need a solid, well-written resume.
2. Stay away from creative euphemistic phrases. Resist the temptation to stray from the normal, scannable resume format. A resume I received for a sales position stated that the person's job (with a fast-food chain) was to "upsell" customers. I keep thinking to this day, "do you wanna supersize it?"
3. Take time before the career fair to find out which companies will be represented there. If you don't, at least read the career fair handout the day of the fair while you're walking in and learn about participating companies and organizations before you approach recruiters. Nothing ticks me off more than a student who approaches me at the table and says, "So, tell me about your company..." I don't mind telling you about my company or about the job opportunities that are available, but I do mind having to do all the work. I have to think you're a really lazy person if you don't know anything about the company. It's okay to ask pertinent questions, but don't expect the recruiters to do the work for you.
4. Have a game plan and focus on no more than three companies you are truly interested in. Do a little research so that you can have an intelligent comment about the company you are approaching. Try something like, "I understand that company XYZ is interested in opening a branch in ABC. Do you think that will expand its overall product mix?" When you engage a recruiter in intelligent dialogue, you stand out. You have limited time at the career fair, so use it wisely. Gather all the giveaways and competitive literature first, enter the sweepstakes, then focus on the companies you've chosen. Again, make sure you don't focus on any more than three, or you won't be able to devote enough time to any of them.
5. Prepare a two- to three-line script for yourself. This part is tricky. You should try to impress recruiters within the first few minutes of conversation. The problem is that others will also be trying to talk with those recruiters. If you talk too long, you'll create a bottleneck in the flow of traffic. If you see disgruntled fellow students behind you waiting to introduce themselves to the recruiter, move on. This is not the interview. You can impress employers at other times. Maintain good eye contact and offer a firm handshake and a few sentences telling us what we want to know. That's the formula that works.
6. Tell the recruiter your name, your class year, and whether you're interested in a full-time, co-op, or internship position. Follow with your career interest, your major(s), and, finally, why you came to the company's table. It's OK to flatter the recruiter, but be careful to be professional and keep the flattery focused on the company. For example, you can say, "I heard that XYZ is pursuing a business strategy that includes merging business units to create more synergy. I think that is a really strategic move."

7. Don't ask the recruiter personal questions. Such questions sound frivolous.
8. Don't skirt the GPA issue. If you're asked, tell the recruiter your cumulative and/or semester GPA. If you aren't sure, say what you think it is. Give us some idea of what we are working with. If your GPA is not stellar it may not matter, but let us know honestly what we are working with. Nothing is worse than asking us to listen to your reasoning about how you are at one GPA but if you factor in the wind change in the month of December your GPA is really at another level.
9. When you give a recruiter your resume, ask what the next step in the process is. Recruiters worth their weight will be able to tell you. Still, don't be surprised if recruiters don't hand out their personal business cards.

Good luck traveling the career fair path.

Adapted with permission by JobWeb.com from "How to Attack a Career Fair," which appeared on the Greater Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce Operation Native Talent Job Fair web site, www.gpcc.com.

Handout courtesy of the Cornell College Career Services Office, Ebersole