

# Tell me about yourself—how to answer this interview question

This important job interview question has a way of making candidates blurt out their life stories. But that isn't what potential employers want to hear.

It's one of the most frequently asked interview questions: "Tell me about yourself." Your response will set the tone for the rest of the interview—no pressure! This question can be paralyzing, leaving you wondering what it is the interviewer really wants to know. *Do they want to know what you did at your last gig? Your soft skills? How you named your cat?* Actually, none of the above.

Here's a little secret: When an interviewer says, "Tell me about yourself," he or she really wants to know how your experience is pertinent to the job you're interviewing for.

Eleanor dreaded this question. When it was the first one asked at her interview, she fumbled her way through a vague answer, not focusing on what she could bring to the job.

"I'm happily married and originally from Denver," she began. "My husband was transferred here three months ago, and I've been getting us settled in our new home. I'm now ready to go back to work. I've worked in a variety of jobs, usually customer service-related. I'm looking for a company that offers growth opportunities."

The interview went downhill after that. She had started with personal information and gave the interviewer reason to doubt whether she was an employee who would stay for very long.

- She's married, and when her husband gets transferred that means she has to leave; she did it once and can do it again.
- She has some work experience with customers but didn't emphasize what she did.
- She is looking to grow. What about the job she is applying for? Will she stay content for long?

Responding to this free-form request successfully comes down to three things: **focus**, **script** and **practice**. You cannot afford to wing this answer.

## Focus

Define what you do as it relates to the job, think about three to five past experiences that are relevant to the job at hand and try to quantify in terms of time, money or people. Then list three to five strengths you have that are pertinent to this job (experiences, traits, skills, etc.). All of this adds up to the message you want the interviewer to know about you when you leave.

Eleanor is strong in communications and connecting with people. She has a strong background and proven success with customer relationships. Her real strength is her follow-through. She prides herself on her reputation for meeting deadlines.

## Script

Write out a script that includes the information you want to convey. Begin by talking about past experiences and proven success:

*"I have been in the customer service industry for the past five years. My most recent experience has been handling incoming calls in the high tech industry. One reason I particularly enjoy this business, and the challenges that go along with it, is the opportunity to connect with people. In my last job, I formed some significant customer relationships resulting in a 30 percent increase in sales in a matter of months."*

Next, mention your strengths and abilities:

*"My real strength is my attention to detail. I pride myself on my reputation for following through and meeting deadlines. When I commit to doing something, I make sure it gets done, and on time."*

Conclude with a statement about your current situation:

*"What I am looking for now is a company that values customer relations, where I can join a strong team and have a positive impact on customer retention and sales."*

## Practice

Practice with your script until you feel confident about what you want to emphasize in your statement. Your script should help you stay on track, but you shouldn't memorize it—you don't want to sound like a broadcast news announcer or a robot. You want to sound natural, like a real person that people would like to have in the next cubicle or talk to at the happy hour.

Even if you're not asked this type of question to begin the interview, this preparation will help you focus on what you have to offer. You will also find that you can use the information in this exercise to assist you in answering other questions. The more you can talk about your product—you!—the better chance you will have at selling it.

## Prepare additional answers

It doesn't matter what industry you're in or what stage of your career you're at—the job interview is nerve racking every single time. The secret to keeping your anxiety at bay is crafting answers in advance.