



PR POINTERS



How to Interview for Your First Job in Public Relations

[By Molli Megasko]

I began my career as an intern at Arment Dietrich. I was hired on full-time as an account coordinator at the end of my three-month internship. And within six months, I was promoted to assistant account executive. I also was given the responsibility of screening and bringing in new college graduates for interviews. In this article, I'm going to give you some advice that probably no one has told you.

First of all, **do not send a blind email to the "contact us" email address on the company's website.** If you don't take the time to pick up the phone and ask the company who to send your resume to, you're just asking for your info@ or humanresources@ email to be deleted. Trust me, your email is going straight to the deleted file if you just hit "contact us" on the website and write something like "I'm looking for a job. Please call me at XXX-XXXX." I'm not joking—we get no less than 20 emails that say this exact thing every week.

Next, **do your research.** Know the PR industry, and know the responsibilities of a newly graduated PR person. It doesn't hurt to pick up the phone, call a PR firm, and schedule time with an employee to ask questions. This is not a job interview; it's an informational interview where one can gain insight and ask blunt questions, including the salary question, without having the stress of impressing for a job.

Know the company you are interviewing with. Going to a company's website to learn about who they are and what they do is not enough. Many times, firms don't list all their current clients, and you can't rely on reading their mission statements to know enough about them. A great example of this is our website's listing of a chairman named Charles Arment. People, he's not real! If you'd ventured beyond the "Our People" portion of the site, you'd know that. We always ask job candidates if they know

who Charles is. If they answer that he's the chairman (we even had one person ask when he would get to meet him), we know they know nothing about our firm, and they're not invited back.

As a PR professional, I have made Google my best friend. More than 75% of my day is research; whether it is pitching a reporter, writing a news release, or simply monitoring my clients' industries, I am constantly researching. Find out if the company you are interviewing with has been in the news lately or if it has recently won a new client, and use that knowledge in your interview.

On that note, be familiar with the person interviewing you. When approached to come in for an interview, it is all right to ask whom you will be meeting with. This way, you can research them, find out where they came from, or find out what clients they work for. This is a good chance to impress your interviewer with your knowledge, listening, and research skills. Be prepared, and arrive with questions relating to your research.

When it comes down to the actual interview, **dress to impress.** Even if you know they will be wearing jeans and flip-flops, wear a suit. You always want to dress the part, and it's not impressive not to be in a suit.

Come prepared. Come to the interview with a pad of paper, a pen or two, extra resumes (on nice paper), personal business cards, writing samples, and any leave-behinds you

might have. It is always better to have more than enough supplies than to have to ask for paper or tell the interviewer that you will send writing samples or references later.

During the interview, **ask intelligent questions.** There are differences in the ways most newcomers ask questions. Some don't ask any at all, some ask questions just to ask them, and others ask smart questions, take notes, and respond to the answers. Those in the third category are the people who will make a difference in the PR world.

Be able to articulate **what makes you different** from any other person who might be interviewing. This is where PR skills come in handy. Make yourself a key-message guide and follow that throughout your interview. Listing your strengths with explanations and examples shows confidence and the skills of media training. If you can't do PR for yourself, then how is someone supposed to believe you will be able to do PR for a client?

Portfolios are great to bring on an interview; they show organization, professionalism, and confidence. But they can also hurt your chances if they are not well prepared. Don't bring your portfolio to an interview and simply hand it to the interviewer. Walk the interviewer through it if he or she asks. You don't want to waste the time you have to impress him or her by showing work that may not be pertinent.

Try to **relate** what the interviewer discusses to something you have done. If you think



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about it, almost anything can be looked at as having a PR aspect: working in a restaurant (new business), working in retail (custodmer service), making the Dean’s List (results). It is up to you to be able to make that connection between what the company offers and your experience.

There are also a few **do nots of the public relations interview**. Besides keeping in mind the do nots of any interview-don’t be late, don’t chew gum, and don’t talk about your dead cat-there are other public relations interview do nots to keep in mind:

- Do not ask about pay on the first interview. This shows more interest in compensation than in the firm.
- Do not expect to come in at the top. A lot of PR firms start their entry-level employees out as interns. This gives them opportunities to test them out and vice versa.

- Do not overlook the writing test. If the place with which you are interviewing requires a writing test, study up and take it very seriously. Lots of firms use this as a pass-or-fail factor to determine whether candidates can come in for second interviews.

After the interview, **follow up!** Send handwritten thank-you notes to everyone you met. This means grabbing each interviewer’s business card-there is no excuse for misspelling an interviewer’s name-and relating your thank-you note to something discussed in the interview.

Even if you don’t get the job, you have expanded your **network**. In PR, your network is everything. Keep in touch with those you met; they might know more people hiring, and down the road, something else might open up. Hold onto business cards, and chalk everything up as experience. PR is a competitive industry, but those who have the passion for it survive.

About the Author:

Molli Megasko is an assistant account executive at Arment Dietrich, Inc. After being promoted twice, she now specializes in hospitality and business services. Prior to joining Arment Dietrich, Molli worked with the Disability Resource Center in Kalamazoo, MI. Molli first joined the world of public relations during her four years at Western Michigan University. She graduated in April 2006 with a Bachelor of Arts in Organizational Communications with a minor in business management. While at Western, Molli kept busy by participating in school organizations and activities. She served on the executive board of the WMU chapter of the Public Relations Society of America for two years. She was also involved with the Management Student Organization and was nominated by her professors to represent the student body on the Undergrad Committee while maintaining her Dean’s List grade point average.

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