

How to Build a Strong College Graduate Personal Brand: Recruiters’ Tips for What You Should Do *During* Your Interviews

So, you’ve defined your college graduate personal brand, and you’ve done the work to prepare for your interviews. Now, it’s the moment of truth. What can you do to make sure you put your best personal brand forward and ace the interview? I interviewed many of the country’s top college recruiters, and here are just a few of the tips they have for students to follow during job interviews:

Be Professional and Polite — Always. Do you say, “Hello. It’s nice to meet you”? Or do you say, “Hey there, how’s it goin’?” When you greet anyone in the company — no matter who it is (even if it’s someone you already know) — are you professional and polite? An interview is a time to be friendly, but not overly casual. And be sure to say “thank you” and “please” when it fits.

Take Notes. Most recruiters say that the candidates who bring a notebook and pen to interviews stick out. Taking notes during the interview shows that the candidate is genuinely interested. But some interviewers also say that about half of the candidates they meet arrive *without* a notebook. So, set yourself apart by bringing a nice pen and a neat and professional looking notebook (one without any tears or scribbling on it). It communicates a conscientious personal brand and helps you remember key points you covered during the interview.

And be sure to write down names and titles of key people who are mentioned during your interview. You may need those later.

Don’t Fake It. If you truly don’t know the answer to a question, absolutely, positively avoid making something up! Tell the interviewer you’re not sure of the answer, and say you’ll get back to him or her as soon as possible with a response. Explain that you’d rather do the research and make sure you’re answering correctly. Most interviewers won’t see this as a negative; they may even see it as a sign of integrity.

Let’s say that an interviewer asks you about your “non-major” GPA (the GPA for courses you took outside of your major), and the question takes you by surprise. *Be honest.* Tell the interviewer you’ll send him or her an e-mail with that GPA calculation within 24 hours. Then, as soon as you return to your dorm, do the calculation and send that important follow-up e-mail. This is how to turn a potential negative into a positive by showing that you keep to your word.

Another mistake to avoid when it comes to “faking it” is to pretend you understand a question when you really don’t. You shouldn’t feel badly about asking the interviewer to repeat a particular question or explain it more clearly. You might think you’ll look “stupid” by doing so, but the truth is you’ll only look stupid if you give an answer that doesn’t fit with the question that was asked!

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Posture. Powerful self-confidence is communicated by holding your shoulders straight and not slumping. Look straight ahead as you walk, not down, especially as you enter an interviewer’s office, and you will convey the kind of self-assurance that — let’s face it — we all want to communicate as part of our personal brand. And be careful not to slouch when you sit in a chair in the interviewer’s office. Recruiters say this is a definite personal branding mistake.

Extensions of the “Trademarked You.” Your personal brand is like your trademark — “YOU™” — so your briefcase, folder, notebook, or whatever else you carry in to an interview represents your college graduate personal brand as much as you do. So, if you have an old worn-out briefcase, or if you bring important documents in a ragged manila folder with writing or stickers all over it, think about how that might look to an interviewer. You don’t have to spend a lot of money on a briefcase, but being neat and orderly does matter.

Ask Questions in a Way That Sells Yourself. Learn how to ask questions during an interview in a way that focuses on your strengths. Here are some examples:

- “Given my experience as a top seller in my part-time job, what opportunities for advancement would you see here for someone like me?”
- “I took some courses in marketing and applied what I learned as a volunteer at a non-profit to help them raise more money. How open is the company to exploring new ideas like that from entry-level employees?”

Those Interfering Cell Phones. Be sure to turn off your cell phone before you enter the company’s building. Letting your phone ring or buzz during an interview is a top pet peeve of recruiters and could cause your resume to land in the trash can. And don’t even think about talking or texting on your cell phone or checking your e-mail on your Blackberry while you’re in the company’s waiting room! Remember: What you say to your roommate could very well be reported back to the interviewer through the receptionist. Plus, your phone beeping and clicking is likely to annoy employees and anyone else near the waiting area.

Keep these points top of mind, and your college graduate personal brand will come through loud and clear during interviews. You’ll gain a decided edge over most other grads who haven’t bothered to learn what interviewers want and look for.

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With an MBA from Harvard Business School, Brenda’s career has spanned more than two decades and has included developing mega brands for Procter & Gamble and Bristol-Myers Squibb across four continents and 50 countries. Now, as President of Brand Development Associates (BDA) International, she travels the world speaking, training, and coaching individuals and companies to greater success through creative, yet practical, corporate and personal brand development.

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