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Winning Work at the Interview: It's All About Chemistry—Part II

by Richard N. Pollack, FAIA, FIIDA

In last month's column, I described interview techniques to implement after your firm has completed the proposal process. In this column, I will drill down into the details of what makes an interview successful to secure a project.

Cookies

Bring bakery cookies to the interview to break the ice and allow time for the team to get seated, get through the introductions, and exchange business cards. Realtors often suggest having chocolate chip cookies baking during open houses, and the same approach applies to having cookies in a conference room. If the client does not immediately take a cookie, I would reach for one. Then the others will likely dive in.

Seating order

Your team can benefit from not having all power players seated at one end of the table or across from each other. Arranging seating is easy when the interviewers are already seated, or if they are taking a break between interviews and you can see their names on anything left at their seats. Having the firm principal seated at one corner and the senior client seated at the diagonal corner is the ideal scenario.

The role of interview principal

During your firm's meeting, the interview principal:

- Runs the interview for the firm, and is typically also the project manager.
- Starts the meeting and briefly introduces the team members by name, credentials, and functional role. A great tactic for the interview principal is to put his or her watch on the table to reinforce adherence to time parameters and demonstrate their project management skills.
- Says there will be time at the end for Q&A, but also explains that this should be a conversation, so questions along the way are encouraged.
- Notes the team's understanding of the project and asks about any additional items the client might want addressed.
- Uses "sign posts" to signal the second presenter while restating the person's name and functional role. Sign posting is a methodology used to transition cleanly from one presenter to another. The cues are visual and/or spoken and help reinforce team chemistry. As does smiling!

Image slideshows

PowerPoint is often a crutch. I recommend that it not be used unless it is absolutely critical to show specific images or videos that can't be shown in another manner. My preference is to place framed photos in an archival-quality photo box and position the box at the middle of the

table. No one knows what it contains, which creates anticipation. Open the box ceremoniously, then remove the black-matted, large-format photos and place them on a tabletop easel. The client immediately understands that your work is precious and important.

Body language

All team members must exhibit good body language. Don't place your hands in your pockets, don't jingle change or keys, and don't look at your notes while listening or speaking. When a team member is presenting, the rest of the team should look at the speaker and not glance at clients, or anyone or anything else. An occasional nod to support whatever a colleague is saying can be very effective. When presenting or responding to a question, make eye contact with each of the clients, not just the questioner.

Hardcopy material

Do not bring any hardcopy material to hand to the client because the client has already seen your brochure and/or proposal. If you must have hardcopy material, hide it until the end so that no one is reading it during your presentation. The goal of the interview is to have the client focused only on your team in order to build chemistry.

Rehearsal

It is worth stating that you should always rehearse for an interview. Not fully preparing or rehearsing invites failure. In my firm, presentations were organized to be completed within 20 to 25 minutes, and to answer all client questions before they were asked. When finished presenting, we would ask the clients for questions, and 90 percent of the time they would say, "No, you've answered all our questions." Also, always ask to be the last interview so the client will actually remember you!

Effectively using these techniques will demonstrate your team's great chemistry and help you win more work.

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