Career Central™ Advice

Job Fairs: All the Wrong Moves

Mistakes that can sabotage your job fair success and leave a poor impression.

It only looks like a candy store.

Despite all the slick display booths, colorful balloons, and free loot, job fairs are professional events, not social bashes. Your objective as a serious job seeker is to target employers of interest with your résumé and, through face-to-face interaction, convince them that you have the stellar credentials worthy of a coveted future interview.

Your first encounter with a potential employer might be at a job fair. Fail to prepare, forget your manners, dress inappropriately, and you could take yourself right out of the running regardless of how good your résumé might be.

Don't wing it. You may crash and burn.

Keep in mind that recruiters, scouting for the most qualified candidates, are as intent on screening people out as they are in letting them in. Don't make the elimination process any easier by committing the following job fair faux pas.

Not doing your homework. Failure to research a company of interest and asking less-than-intelligent questions may reveal you didn't care enough to inform yourself on the most basic level.

No game plan. Lacking a strategy for targeting which companies you want to approach, plus poor time management, can both result in missed opportunities. Time is limited; know what you want.

Poor packaging. Jeans, casual attire, displaying tattoos, piercings, cleavage, and bling can be distracting and peg you as 1) less than serious for the job, and 2) ignorant of the company culture. Dress as you would for any professional interview (see: Dress for Success: Men/Women). Also carry your pad and pencil in a briefcase or portfolio; plastic grocery bags just don't cut it.

The late shift. Not arriving early can mean dealing with crowds and long lines for popular employers. Things get busy, people get tired, and you risk becoming just another face with a résumé.

Tongue tied. Failure to deliver an effective elevator speech, ask intelligent questions, and articulate goals concisely, directly, and clearly can indicate lack of preparation, presentation, and planning. Many positions require good verbal communication skills. If you can't effectively convey what *you* want, who will?

Loot the booth. Company freebies are incentives to attract and inform job seekers, as well as to thank them for stopping by. It's crass to just load up and leave.

Poor people skills. Watch your body language. No gum chewing or cell phone conversation on the recruiter's time! Don't interrupt another job seeker's conversation. Remember, actions speak louder than words about your confidence, capabilities, and company compatibility.

Monopolizing recruiters. You're not the only job seeker; be considerate if there are others in line. You can always come back or contact the recruiter in a follow up call. And don't waste everyone's time with a company you're not interested in.

Short on supplies. Run out of résumés and lose the advantage of handing in your credentials directly. Also don't let an outdated or poorly prepared résumé sell you short.

Having an entourage. Walk the fair way alone. Friends and family can slow you down and be distracting for everyone.

Messy applications. Be neat; these are legally required documents. Leave the chicken scratch in the barnyard.

Speak negatively. Don't.

Small thanks. Don't fail to thank recruiters during and after the expo, or to follow up on contacts.

Finally, job fairs are not the place to ask about salaries, vacations, and benefits. Focus on what's needed and expected to meet the employer's needs, and the value you'll bring.

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In a nutshell:

These can undermine your chances for a subsequent interview:

- **Poor attitude and attire, manners and mannerisms**
- **Failure to prepare and sound informed and interested**
- **Poor time management**
- **Vague goals and lack of focus**
- **Poor people skills; failure to respect the recruiter's time**
- **Lying; always a no-no**
- **Not having enough résumés to hand out**
- **Failing to follow up with a thank you or a contact**

Employers are looking. What will they find in you?

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