

How to Stand Out in a Job-Fair Crowd

by Cheryl Soltis

College students face daunting challenges during their academic careers: tough courses, heavy workloads and the pressure to find time for a social schedule. But attending job fairs, a rite of passage for many upper classmen, presents its own set of demands.

Bob Roth, author of the book *The 4 Realities of Success During and After College*, calls the whole process of recruiting on college campuses a "negative process" because "employers are not trying to figure out how to screen you in." Instead, he says, "they are looking for things that will screen you out so they can interview those who still remain on the list."

With limited space on a recruiter's roster, students need to find ways to stand out from their peers. "It's all about preparation and passion," says Mark Mehler, a principal at CareerXroads, a recruiting-technology consulting firm in Kendall Park, New Jersey. "Your expression, your handshake, your dress, your resume can make you a success or failure in seconds."

To showcase your passion for a position, Mr. Mehler says, students should be aggressive and ask questions. "It may seem very basic, but you walk up to the recruiter with a smile, shake hands strongly, look the recruiter in the eye," he says. Talk about what you've learned in your research about the company and why you really want to work there. Ask, "How do we make this happen?" he says.

Mr. Roth agrees that preparation is essential, and he says it should start much earlier than many students think. "The senior-year job search begins in your freshman year," he says, when students need to start building networks and identifying potential employers. Students should also be aware that the types of companies a job fair will attract can vary from college to college. "A school usually has a positive reputation in three or four subject areas, even though they may offer 30, 40 or more majors," Mr. Roth says. "Company recruiters gravitate to the colleges with good reputations in their particular area of interest."

To get ready for a job fair, begin by finding out what companies will be there. "Understand what their mission is and what they're looking for," says Mr. Mehler. One way to stand out: "Through your alumni network, social network, peers, friends, parents, cat, dog, canary, find someone you know that works in that company." That way, he says, "when you approach the booth and shake hands, you can drop the name of the friend [along] with your resume, which gets you an instant introduction and separates you from the pack."

Marie Artim, assistant vice president of recruiting for Enterprise Rent-A-Car, has been to hundreds of college career fairs. "You see a big difference in the students who are confident and ready to talk about themselves," she says. Signing up for mock interviews at the career center and joining campus groups that offer public-speaking opportunities can help you prepare to explain your skills.

Mr. Mehler suggests that students have a friend videotape them interviewing. "It shows what you're doing right and definitely what you're doing wrong," he says. "Take the tape to a career counselor and have them review it with you," he adds.

Job fairs may be a convenient way to meet with a variety of employers in one place and within a few hours, but they can be a discouraging experience. Jeff Boyd, who attended a job fair last spring before his

graduation in May from Purdue University in Indiana, says he spent most of his time standing in line to hand resumes to recruiters. Mr. Boyd, who majored in aerospace engineering, did get several interviews from the job fair, but "not as many as I would have liked," he says. He has had more success searching online and getting in touch with contacts at companies about specific job opportunities.

Shannon Thompson, a freshman political science major at the University of Pittsburgh in Pennsylvania, attended her first job fair last week. She says she found it useful because she wasn't completely certain of the type of internship or job she was looking to find. "I was expecting to perhaps collect some brochures and free pencils and then leave," she says. "However, I was able to talk personally with a representative at each individual company."

Changing federal regulations about what constitutes a job applicant mean that some recruiters won't accept paper resumes at a job fair, instead referring students to a Web site. This doesn't mean the recruiter isn't interested, Ms. Artim of Enterprise says. She advises students ask for a business card or a contact name and follow up with an email or phone call. Just "let [your new contact] know you're applying online," she says.

Perhaps the best thing students can do in their quests for jobs is to stay positive, keep searching and be ready and willing to do the homework required. "You have to have 100 leads a month active to get 10 interviews to get an offer," Mr. Mehler notes. "If you get the 10 interviews that means your resume is working. If you don't, it means your resume needs work. If you get to the finals in the 10, but don't get the job, the candle has gone out. You haven't sold yourself. You don't have the passion."