

If you're looking for work, you already have a job...

No matter what type of work you would like to do, no matter what type of job you would like to have, until you get it, you have to accept that at this very moment, you do have a job: you are a sales person.

The good news is that you only have to make one sale.

How long it takes to make that sale depends on you. The most successful sales people really don't sell anything. Instead, they look for problems to solve and situations to improve. They have a clear understanding of their available resources and how best to put them to work. They help prospective clients evaluate a situation to determine whether a problem exists and whether the proposed solution is a good fit. Most importantly, they know that their ultimate success is a matter of building and maintaining relationships, rather than making sales.

The first step is to understand what employers need and how to package yourself accordingly. At a minimum, they are looking for a track record of reliable competence. Beyond finding people who can handle the basic requirements of a job description, they need people who have the potential to move the company or organization forward, who can anticipate problems and navigate around them. They are looking for people who can create new opportunities.

Even without specific work experience, you have developed useful skills as an undergraduate, such as the ability to think critically and in the abstract. You can articulate your ideas, both in writing and in conversation. You have the ability to research, to learn, to produce intelligent content on demand and on deadline. In other words, you have the ability to get the job done. This is especially true if you have been involved in team or group projects. Through collaboration, you have learned how to work cooperatively with others towards a common purpose. You have also learned how to count on others and in turn, what it means to have others count on you. You have proven that you can make commitments to achieving long term rigorous goals. In addition to handling this workload, hopefully you have rounded out your life with more than simply accumulating enough credits to earn a degree.

Take a look at what you've accomplished so far and see how it matches up to what a prospective employer needs. Rather than relying on a simple resume listing dates and job duties, refocus and articulate your accomplishments in terms of purposes, goals and achievements. Organize these accomplishments by defining the goals that were set, the planning and strategy involved, and the ultimate goal that was realized. Be prepared to talk about adversity and the obstacles you encountered, to offer concrete examples of when you had to implement "Plan B". Have ready examples of team work where you were not necessarily the leader, but an integral contributor and problem solver.

The next item to tackle is “content vs. presentation”. At this point, the package you are selling represents your potential, based on your experiences so far. Of course you want it to be the best looking package possible, but anyone with experience can see right through all shine and no substance. To separate yourself from the pack, you need to review all the little things that go into making not just a great first impression, but a lasting one. You want to make sure that the picture of you mirrors the corporate culture you want to enter; this includes everything from the way you dress and comb your hair to the digital DNA you have left on the Internet. To date, the majority of the adults in your life have been part of your communities. The working world is full of adults that are not viewing you through the same comfortable eyes as a professor, teacher, preacher, coach, or parent. When they are evaluating you, they are considering not just how capable you are for the work, but how you are going to represent them to the rest of the world – a world populated by decision makers that may be 10, 20, 30, even 40 or 50 years older than you. One of the first things the best sales people do is to make sure not to give a customer any reason not to buy. Thanks to social media, you must be prepared for your name to precede you...plan accordingly, especially if there is anything that will require explanation.

Successful selling is not speed dating. The higher the stakes, the more the sales process resembles a project – a project perfectly suited to test out your liberal arts education. Research the industries and companies you are interested in and develop a clear understanding of the types of challenges they face. As best you can, learn about their business and corporate objectives. You want to be prepared so that you can guide the conversation. Develop a list of questions that can open up conversations about the challenges and opportunities. You will want to be able to turn your accomplishments into a conversation of examples of how you solved similar challenges. You will want to be able to share your track record of reliability, of showing up and getting the job done right, regardless of how much effort it took. You will want to demonstrate that you can hit the ground running, take direction, be part of the team, analyze and identify issues and can be relied upon.

It simply isn't enough to be capable of doing "the job". There may be a hundred other people who can do the same job. Rather, show that you are always looking for ways to do the job better and that you can help make that happen. Make it clear that you're looking for a place that provides opportunities to put your creative problem solving skills to work, where you can make meaningful contributions towards meeting the company's challenges, and can continue to learn and grow.

Another benefit of all this research and preparation is that it shows initiative - a highly valued commodity. Along these lines, it's not a bad idea to start this process well in advance of graduation. While many will follow the natural inclination to take some time off after graduation to sort things out, the better opportunities are going to be taken by those who get out there first.

Successful sales people share a common skill: they are adept at removing stress. A typical sales situation is extremely stressful. The sales person is trying to make a sale while the buyer is trying to protect their wallet. It can be an adversarial relationship where someone is ultimately the winner and someone is the loser. Successful sales people avoid the “win-lose” scenario altogether by forging an alliance with the buyer, with the mutual end goal being a successful solution for the situation.

Keep in mind that this alliance may or may not wind up with the sales person providing the right solution for that particular company on that that day. However, good sales people do not look at this as a failure! Although the tangible benefits may not be immediate (money in your pocket today), the future benefits can be valuable. Positive relationships pave the way for introductions to others who just may be buying what you have to offer. Think of it this way: wouldn't you rather buy from someone with a positive referral? And, what about the future? Maybe the company does not need you today, but they may need you tomorrow. Who would they go to first: the person who made them feel like an adversary or the person who made them feel like a partnership was established?

Here is a simple approach to sales: “I’m not sure if I can help you, but I’d like to try. If I can, great! Otherwise, at least we’ll know you’re already in great shape. At the very least, if I can’t help you, you might know of someone else that I should talk to.”

From a job hunting standpoint: “I am looking to put my skills, experience, and energy to work. I’d like to get your take on what type of opportunities there might be for me here. I’m hoping you can point me in the right direction. Who knows...I might even fit into your organization, if not now, maybe down the road.”

Translated: “I’d like to talk to you, but there’s no pressure to hire me. Just evaluate me and let me evaluate you. If there’s a fit, great! Otherwise, I would appreciate your pointing me towards others where I might have a similar conversation.”

This is the basic sales process: you collect a large pool of “suspects” (this is the sales terminology for “any and everyone in your target market”). You narrow down your suspects to a smaller pool of prospects that you qualify as to their potential as clients. You meet as many qualified prospects as possible, looking for best fits between their situation and your possible solution. From each meeting, especially if there is no best fit, you want to come away with a handful of names to add to your prospects pool.

These referrals are key, because they provide an additional lead in for the opening conversation: “I was talking to [so-and-so] and they suggested I give you a call. I don’t know if I can be of service to you, but I’d appreciate the opportunity to at least meet with you. If I can be of service

to you now, great! If not, well, if a situation ever arises where you might need someone like me, at least we'll already be acquainted."

Not every conversation will result in an interview or job offer. However, every conversation will offer the opportunity to create a relationship. Take this opportunity to go one step further: follow up with a brief, well-thought out letter. Thank the person for their time, insights, and any referrals they may have given you. Depending on the person you met, you might even consider using quality stationary and regular mail. Remember, it's not just a matter of making a great first impression – it's a matter of making a great *lasting* impression.

Sooner or later, you will find yourself in a conversation where the person you are talking to has an opportunity to put your skills, experience, and energies to work for them and you'll finally be in a position to do the work you were looking to do. Just keep in mind that although you will no longer be the "outside" sales person, your ultimate success will always depend on you: your continuing drive to find opportunities beyond the job-at-hand, to think creatively and "outside the box", to identify and analyze issues, to solve problems and overcome challenges, and to "sell" your abilities.