How to Make the Most of Career Fairs

Advice from a recruiter who has a lot of experience on the other side of the career fair booth.

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Career fairs can be a great place for you to meet potential employers, but you need to do more than print 30 copies of your resume, practice your handshake, and press your interview suit to succeed. Here are tips to help you get the most out of career fairs.

▪ Before printing multiple copies of your resume, have others proofread it for typos. Recruiters hate those! We'll question your work ethic if you hand in a poorly written resume filled with mistakes. Also, don't use "creative" fonts or cram all your awards and association memberships in by using a type size that is too small for the naked eye. Remember, substance is the key. Your job is to get through our first round of screening. For that, you need a solid, well-written resume.

▪ Stay away from creative, euphemistic phrases. A resume I received for a sales position stated that the person's job (with a fast-food chain) was to “upsell” customers. I keep thinking to this day, “do you wanna supersize it?”

▪ Take time before the career fair to find out which companies will be represented. At a minimum, read the career fair handout in advance. Learn something about their companies before you approach recruiters. Nothing ticks me off more than a student who approaches my table and says, “So, tell me about your company…” I don’t mind discussing my company or its job opportunities, but I do mind doing all the work. Worse, I’ll think you’re lazy if you haven’t taken the time to research the company.

▪ Have a game plan and focus on no more than three companies that interest you. Again, do a little advance research so you can make an intelligent comment about the company you are approaching. Try something like, “I understand that company XYZ may open a branch in ABC. Do you think that will expand its overall product mix?” When you engage a recruiter in intelligent dialogue, you stand out. You have limited time at the career fair, so use it wisely. Gather giveaways and competitive literature first, enter the sweepstakes, then focus on the companies you’ve chosen.

▪ Prepare a two- or three-line script for yourself. This part is tricky. Try to impress recruiters within the first few minutes of conversation. The problem is that others will be trying to do the same. If you talk too long, you’ll create a bottleneck in the flow of traffic. If you see students behind you waiting to speak to the recruiter, move on. This is not an interview. You can impress employers at other times. Maintain good eye contact, and offer a firm handshake and a few introductory sentences. That’s the formula that works.

▪ Tell the recruiter your name, your class year, and whether you’re interested in a full-time, co-op, or internship position. Follow with your career interest, your major(s), and why you came to the company’s table. It’s okay to flatter the recruiter, but be professional and focus the flattery on the company. For example, you can say, “I heard that XYZ is pursuing a business strategy that includes merging business units to create more synergy. I think that is a really strategic move.”

▪ Don’t ask the recruiter personal questions. Such questions sound frivolous.

▪ Don’t skirt the GPA issue. If you’re asked, tell the recruiter your cumulative and/or semester GPA. If you aren’t sure, give an estimate. If your GPA is not stellar it may not matter, but we need to know what we’re working with. Nothing is worse than listening to your reasoning about how your GPA would be higher except for the wind change in the month of December.

▪ When you give a recruiter your resume, ask what the next step in the process is. Recruiters worth their salt will be able to tell you.

Career fairs are wonderful places for students and employers to make initial contact if you invest the time to prepare properly. Use these tips to help you get the most out of career fairs. See you at the fair!