



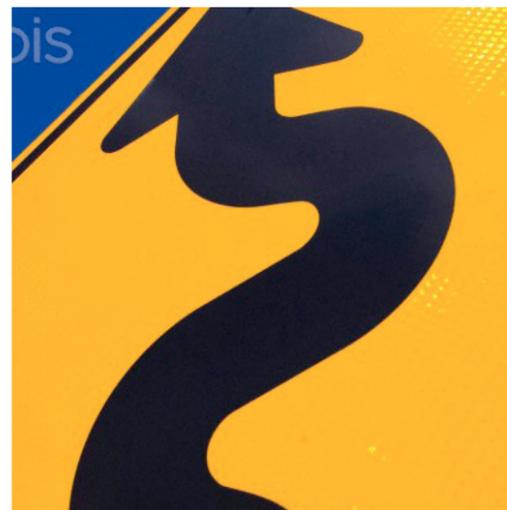
Promote yourself

Whether you're job-hunting or working toward a promotion, communication is your key to getting ahead

by Wendy Lyons Sunshine



Your career is a marathon, not a sprint. Taking the time to prepare can put you ahead of the race.



“HOW I GOT THE JOB”

David Genova, real estate developer, Montclair, NJ

David Genova interned at real estate–development companies while still an undergraduate at Bucknell University. Watching the executives brainstorm about buying, selling, and financing properties was a revelation; Genova had found his niche.

How did you get started at Willow Street Partners?

I never applied for a job. Steven Plofker, owner of Willow Street Partners, was rehabbing old structures in Montclair, NJ, and I loved what he was doing. I emailed him through the town’s online “water cooler” and asked for a 20 minute meeting. I hoped to learn about what he did.

How did that meeting go?

He asked me why I was there. Soon I found myself pitching him an idea for putting housing in an old hospital building. We started going back and forth — he actually had a drawing of the site there — and together we laid out a plan.

By the end of the meeting he asked where I was going to work after graduation. I came home in the summer and he had an office waiting for me.

What was your first project?

Steven had me figure out what to do with an ancient building. I put together a deal for restoring it into a 2,500-seat live-music theatre and selling it. When it reopened, the first two acts were Counting Crows and Tony Bennett.

Why do you think it succeeded?

I researched how the concert business makes money and asked questions of people who didn’t end up buying the building. By the time I was able to pitch the big fish, I could present them with a solid business plan.

Do communication skills help?

Absolutely. I keep everybody in the loop. I tell Steven when I plan to look at a new building. Then I bring him a package of information about the project so we can sit down and discuss it.

There’s something else that goes a long way, too. It’s to learn a little bit about a lot of subjects. Then you have a talking point with anybody. It’s the best way for people to like you and trust you and want to invest with you.

You’re ready to take your career to the next level. Maybe it’s nailing a new job or turbo-charging the one you have. Either way, we’ve got the secret to advancing your career: savvy self-promotion.

From writing killer cover letters to connecting with colleagues and selling your ideas, you’ll move ahead by effectively communicating your value

JOB-HUNT SMARTS

Take inventory. If you haven’t already, start a list of your responsibilities and successes throughout your career, advises Jeremy Worthington of Buckeye Résumés. By maintaining a running career inventory, you have a valuable resource to mine when it’s time to update your résumé.

For each position you’ve held, list:

- Your title, including specific duties and required skills
- Your employer, including company size, customer base, and position in its industry
- How you contributed to the company’s success. Whether you saved or earned the company money, how you prevented or corrected problems, and how you handled projects. If you have a metric demonstrating the scope of your contribution, include it.

If you never kept a career inventory before, now’s the time to start!

Focus your message. As you consider your potential employers, identify their specific needs. Are you targeting a software developer, a retailer, or a trucking company? Do you hope to work in their accounting department, marketing department, or upper management?

Companies and industries have their own jargon and priorities, Worthington says. Be sure your résumé speaks directly to your prospective employer’s concerns. Keep the résumé and cover letter tight and focused; don’t deluge busy recruiters and hiring managers with irrelevant details.

Use your résumé to highlight areas of your background that specifically address an employer’s needs. For example, if you’re applying for an accounting position at a tax firm, don’t dwell on your knowledge of accounts payable. You should to highlight positions in which you filed tax forms, handled audits, or identified tax savings.

Talk about real events and real results you achieved that speak to potential employers. “I have been responsible for tax filings at three companies and helped each employer identify ways to save money.”

“We think we need to throw all this information at an employer,” Worthington says, “but it’s not compelling.” Examine your career inventory and select the best, most relevant details for your résumé and cover letter.

How far back should your job history go? “Go back as far as you need to, to make a proper presentation,” says Worthington. “But only include parts that are germane to the audience.”

Redefine yourself, positively. Transition coach Ann Fry encourages those changing careers to develop a personal pitch that builds on strengths. Avoid put-downs of past employers — instead emphasize positives that make you a desirable candidate.

For example, Fry suggests recasting the negative in a new light. Instead of, “I’ve gotten tired of being a CFO for large companies and climbing the corporate ladder. I want to do something meaningful where I’m not killing myself.” You explain, “I’ve had a wonderful career and worked with great companies. I developed incredible skills and now I’d like to apply those skills in other areas, such as for a nonprofit or university.”

Sweat the small stuff. “A single typo can doom your résumé to being tossed aside,” says

John Borchardt, author of Career Management for Scientists and Engineers. “It gives the impression that you’re not a highly careful person.”

He tells job hunters to imagine that they work in a laboratory weighing out chemicals to use in a new product. “Goofing up a decimal point by just one place — using 10 grams instead of 1 gram — could blow up the lab.”

Customize your connections. To distinguish yourself from the crowd of job applicants, think about how you can customize cover letters and interview follow-ups. By tailoring communications to a potential employer, you send the powerful message that you are paying attention and really want the job.

Dianna Booher, author of Voice of Authority: 10 communication strategies every leader needs to know, suggests three strategies for customizing a follow-up email.

1. Call the reader by name.
2. Mention a topic you discussed together.
3. Refer to the next action.

Using them together makes a real impact: “John, as I mentioned I’ll be traveling for the next few days. I’ve attached the article we discussed and look forward to speaking with you after I return to the office on Tuesday.”

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SYNC COMMUNICATION STYLES

Communication-skills trainer Deborah Grayson Riegel says speakers and listeners tend to rely on one of these four styles. Consider your audience when choosing the best option for achieving your goals.

WHAT Individuals with this style want to get to the point, quickly. They may begin meetings by recapping the purpose.

WHO This type of colleague prioritizes people and feelings, and is apt to start meetings by chatting for a few minutes about upbeat interpersonal topics.

HOW Colleagues with this style often speak and listen slowly to be sure they understand; their peers might find them a bit poker-faced. In meetings, this person could say, "Let me tell you how we got here."

WHY These folks want all the facts and details. In meetings, they will run down all the data points to explain how they came up with the conclusion.

The key to success is to recognize your stylistic tendencies, and then put your audience's needs before your own, Riegel says. If you're giving a workshop in the world of advertising, you can do more storytelling because that is the nature of their business. In the financial services sector, get to data points more quickly.



CLIMB THE LADDER FASTER

Sell your ideas. You can't wait for someone else to call attention of your work. When you have a good idea that deserves management attention, you need to sell it every step of the way, Borchardt says.

In a big company that could mean making separate pitches to three departments: R&D, sales and marketing, and production. To be most persuasive, you need to address each audience's concerns. For example, to encourage the sales and marketing team to accept a new product line, let them see them how it will make the company more money and bring them more commissions.

"The production people are usually run ragged already," Borchardt says, "so the last thing they want to hear is 'we're bringing you more work.'" In this case, when presenting the new product line, discuss increased profitability for the plant, which implies job security. You might also point out how similar the new task is to what they're already doing. By connecting the change to something familiar, you help stressed co-workers feel more comfortable.

Perfect the presentation. "I've seen a shift from written reports and proposals to oral presentations," Borchardt says. "Because of time constraints, managers and executives are willing to take 15 to 30 minutes to attend a presentation, but don't want to read a 60-page proposal."

Too many people agonize over their presentations warns Borchardt. "They make many more slides than they need, obsessively tinker with them up to the last minute, or spend too much customizing for each audience." For effective presentations, he recommends:

- Limiting the amount of text on slides
- Clarifying your ideas with graphs and charts
- Avoiding distracting bells and whistles, such as sound effects
- Emphasize benefits to your audience from the very beginning.

Stand up. Nancy Brungard, an analytical chemist at BASF, remembers struggling for years to get a promotion. Supervisors passed her over because she did not have a doctorate, usually required to advance in her field.

Then one day she presented a seminar attended by researchers and several levels of management. It was a watershed moment. "Within two days, I got the promotion," she says.

Her ability to clearly convey technical information to a diverse audience proved invaluable. Along with handling her new management responsibilities, Brungard continues to give formal presentations and lead frequent tours for clients through her department's facilities.

"Of course I get nervous, but I love to present," Brungard says. To avoid butterflies, she focuses on teaching and how she can share information with the audience.

Brungard has weathered 30 years in the same job, despite industry consolidations and staff reductions. She attributes her longevity to communication skills and other talents. "It's not just about technical skills," she says. "It's the ability to handle stress, multitask, and to take a deep breath and stay motivated."

Solve problems. Problem-solvers are more likely to advance in their careers, says career coach Kathleen King, EdD.

Find out what your organization's greatest needs are at present. "Look at the critical issues they're struggling with, and see if you have some insight or action plan to offer," says King. She recommends writing up a brief summary of the need, how you propose to tackle it, and any proof your approach would work."

Document it. "It's absolutely critical to document things in black and white," Brungard says. "Sometimes it can be a quick email that says, 'Hey, I loved our discussion today. Here's what we got out of it.' This reminds others about the discussion and gives you something to build on."

She encourages her staff to get to the point right from the beginning in email and other communications. "This is not a suspense story," Brungard says. "Colleagues and managers will not appreciate if they need to read three pages before you get to the point."

Booher, a communication expert who leads business-writing workshops, agrees. Whether it's a matter of documenting a sales call in your customer-relations database or sending meeting minutes to a project team, she recommends skipping the "once upon a time" stories and "warm-up drills."

Instead, put your conclusion at the beginning, in just a sentence or two, and then circle back and elaborate on your ideas.

"With these three steps, the reader can go as far as is relevant for them," Booher says. "They might assign it to someone else or drop out when their need to know is satisfied." 