

Make Your First Professional Contacts at the Career Fair

Career fairs present an opportunity to make important contacts with potential employers. But you need to do more than press your business suit and print 30 copies of your resume to make the most of this opportunity. Here's what the experts recommend:

Be a Good Scout

Prepare to sell yourself. Remember: you are the product—employers are the customers.

Know your employers. Pick up a list of employers expected at the career fair from your college career center and focus your research on the three or four that interest you most. Go to the fair knowing something about each of these companies. Good research will make every other tip in this article easier to accomplish.

Know what you want. What position or department are you interested in? You can get this kind of information while doing your research. Saying, "I'll take anything," or "I don't know," to a recruiter shows a lack of research.

Dress the part. Go dressed as if you were interviewing. This is your first impression on the employer—you want to look like a professional. Employers say a common mistake students make is not being dressed professionally.

Pack your credentials. Be able to supply potential employers with a simple one page resume. Consider making individually tailored resumes for each of your researched employers, labeling them carefully in advance so you give the right resume to each employer. Bring 20-30 extra resumes for any other opportunities you might discover on the day of the fair.

Mind Your Manners

Carry your credentials in a professional way. A neat folder is fine. A small briefcase works well too. Stow your coat, backpack, and other gear in a cloakroom.

Come early. Don't arrive 30 minutes before the end of the day and expect to talk to employers. Some will have planes to catch; others will be tired and ready to wind up a long day of chatting with students. Come early while employers are fresh—and hit the booths of employers you are most interested in working for first.

Give them a strong handshake and a positive attitude. Greet each employer with a smile and an enthusiastic 30-second sales pitch—your name, your major, and your career interests as they relate to the target company.

Pick up the cards. Collect business cards from recruiters you speak to. Jot notes on the recruiter and the company on the back of the card. Use those notes—and the information on the front of the card—to personalize your thank-you notes.

Ask for the next step. At the end of a conversation with a recruiter, ask what the next step is in the hiring process.

Follow Up

Write a thank-you note. Send a thank-you note to every employer you speak to at the career fair. Some employers prefer notes by mail; some are happy for an e-mailed thank you—check with your career center for advice on which type note to send.

Complete any online applications requested. Even if you've left a resume behind, filling out an online application ensures that your data is in the employer's data base quickly and with the information you prefer.