

# MAKING THE MOST OF A CAREER FAIR

by Erika Osmundson, AgCareers.com Marketing and Communications Manager

**Y**ou are dressed in your best. You have a stellar resume ready and you are off to the career fair.

On the way, the anxiety builds and nervousness mounts. How will I know which employers to approach? What will I say to the person to start the conversation?

All relevant and common fears among college students, but you don't have to be nervous. With a few simple steps and some preparation, you can sell yourself and impress!

## DO YOUR HOMEWORK

Being prepared for a career fair begins long before the day arrives. One of the biggest pet peeves of company representatives working a career fair is a student that approaches them and when asked what they'd like to do, the student responds with, "I don't know or I'm not sure." Have in mind what it is you would like to do or areas that you are interested in.

It is OK to have interests in more than one career type, such as sales or marketing.

It is also OK if you know your career type but maybe not the industry sector you'd like to work in, for example seed or animal nutrition sales. Many employers feel they can teach the product/industry knowledge and are more interested in someone with the innate skills (sales in this example) and a passion in the area.

As long as you have an idea of what you'd like to do, that will help you articulate your career goals to employers, but also compose a much stronger resume to highlight relevant skills.

Most colleges and universities will post information or a listing of employers that will be attending the career fair. In advance of the career fair spend time visiting these employer's web sites and social media pages if they have them.

Career fairs are not only about the employers finding the right employee, but just as much about

students finding a company that is a good fit for them, whether it be a full-time career or an internship.

Career fairs give you the opportunity to learn about and explore many different organizations. Do some research on the companies that will be at the career fair. Find out what types of jobs they have. Often times this is listed on the career fair web site, but can also be found on the company's web site.

Determine if the company's mission and services are something that suit you. Try to get a feel for the company culture and those that work for the organization (again, something that you can get a sense of from a company web site and also the representatives at the actual career fair).

The more you know about the organization going into the career fair, the more prepared and confident you will feel when approaching employers.

A note to underclassmen, it is never too early to start attending career fairs. Take the opportunity to learn all you can about the organizations in the industry and practice interacting with business professionals in a non-threatening setting.

More and more organizations are considering/offering underclassmen internship opportunities. Take advantage of this! Getting involved early will really help your career in the long run.

## BUILD A STRONG RESUME

After you've left the booth, a resume is all that is left to speak for you. Building a resume that highlights your best skills and top attributes can be the difference between getting further in the hiring process or not.

Take time (not just the night before) to work up a really strong resume. It takes time to think through all of the experience and activities that should be included in a resume.

Another advantage of doing it sooner, is to have time to have the resume critiqued by a friend, mentor or someone within the career services office on campus.

Focus your content on work experiences that you have had. Remember to use action words and "measurables" in your brief



**After you have left the career fair, your resume is the only thing left to speak for you. Invest time in advance of the career fair developing a polished resume that is reflective of your accomplishments and experiences. Be sure to have a friend or professional review your resume and provide critiques.**

descriptions of work experience. Employers are looking for what you actually accomplished and how you did so, not just a job description.

Be honest about your accomplishments and don't go overboard using action words that are not descriptive of your accomplishments. Keep the resume formatted neatly using a professional layout with white space, bulleted phrases, and a logical order. There are a number of templates online or available through **AgCareers.com** to help build a strong resume. For tips see the article

“Resumes: From Good to Great” within this Guide.

If you have done your homework and know a few employers that are going to be at the career fair that you have a high level of interest in, you might consider a customized resume that outlines the specific job you have an interest in. This can be done with a tailored objective statement or through a cover letter.

One more note about resumes: most employers have really tried to get to a point where they can accept resumes at the career fair, but some may still ask you to submit your resume online through their web site. Don't let this discourage you. It does not mean that they don't have interest in you. The company likely gets a lot of resumes and has to have resumes submitted online in order to be tracked and managed according to governmental regulations.

If you develop a personal business card, you could ask the company representative if you might leave that with them instead of your resume in that situation.

A nice personal, yet professional, lasting impression can be made by having a business card available. Include professional contact information, such as a professional e-mail and perhaps a LinkedIn profile you use for professional networking. Do not include social media avenues that you want to keep more personal.

## **A GREAT FIRST IMPRESSION**

Always dress to impress!

Unfortunately, first impressions are usually made based on appearance versus what a person says.

This doesn't mean that you need to go out and purchase a \$500 suit. It does however mean that you need to make an effort to look your best.

Nice slacks, shirt and tie will likely suffice for guys and slacks/skirt and a blouse for ladies will work in most cases if a suit is not in your wardrobe. However, if you are applying with a large organization or a company that's culture demands a more professional look, like a trading floor, you may want to consider investing in a suit. You want to try to dress one step above the typical dress for the job you'd be doing when you interview.



**You don't get a second opportunity to make a good first impression and that first impression is highly influenced by appearance. At a career fair make the extra effort to look polished and as professional as possible. If you do not own a suit, consider your next best option and select clothing that is in nice condition and pressed.**

Be sure that clothing is clean, in good condition and pressed.

Gentlemen, invest in having the suit tailored if it is needed so that it fits properly. Ladies be sure skirts are not too short, shirts are not too low cut and pants are not too tight.

If you need advice on what to wear, visit a local department or business attire store and ask for assistance from a sales associate. You might consider asking for a suit as a present from your parents for future career fairs or interviews.

Beyond clothing, consider the rest of your appearance or presence.

Ladies, keep makeup and perfume minimal. Gentleman, same for you — keep cologne and aftershave minimal.

Some organizations are becoming more accepting of piercings and tattoos, but within the agriculture industry the overall population of employers tends to still be pretty conservative.

Consider this as you dress and make the determination of what you have visible based on your discretion given this information. If you question anything while you are getting ready or after you are dressed you should change it. The interview/interaction is hard enough, why add in one more thing to worry or be self conscience about. If you are questioning it, it probably isn't right.

The handshake. Yes it is important! Have a firm yet not too strong handshake. Look the person in the eye and clearly state your name.

Practice your handshake with a friend and ask for feedback. Having a good handshake is something that you'll use long after the career fair!

## **WHAT DO I SAY?**

Make a list of the organizations that you definitely would like to talk to before you arrive.

Keep in mind to explore some of the smaller/medium sized organizations which you may not be as familiar with.

Again, here is where research prior to the career fair on an organization can be very helpful in generating conversation and setting yourself apart. In most instances, hopefully the organization has sent company representatives that are naturally approachable and ready to talk to students.

In those situations, conversation will likely flow easily. The first question they will probably ask you is “Tell me about yourself.” Keep your answer concise and focus on examples that are relevant to work experience or items that might be of interest to the particular organization.

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But for those that don't flow so quickly, here are a few simple conversation starters after you have introduced yourself:

- "I see you have an opening for XXXXX job. What type of person or skill sets are you seeking for that role?" Let the employer share their thoughts and then provide comments on the skills and work experience that you have that may match.
- "I read on your web site that your company recently won a XXXX award. Can you share with me a little more about what that was for?"
- "I'm interested in both sales and marketing, would you be willing to give me a little perspective? In your organization or opinion, what are some of the major differences between these two areas?"
- For underclassmen, you might say, "I'm still exploring my options and not exactly sure what I'm interested in. I have a desire to work in research, but I haven't narrowed in on a particular area. Do you have any suggestions for how I might narrow down my options? What kinds of opportunities are available within your organization for underclassmen?"

Remember, these company representatives will probably have a lot of students to talk to, so be aware of their time and try to keep it brief.

What if it is a company you don't know or hadn't researched? Don't be afraid to approach them. Be honest and let the representative know that you aren't very familiar with the company, but would like to learn more about the organization and opportunities they have available.

Hopefully this will be a rare occurrence because you've done your homework, but it does happen.

Not all employers make it onto the list of participating employers in time.

## **NEXT STEPS**

Many times students forget the most critical step that can help advance their chances for progressing to the next step in the hiring process. Ask the employer what the next step is!

How is it that you can continue the conversation with the company? In some cases that may be signing up for an interview the following day or submitting your resume online. If you sign up for an interview go back and brush up on the company as well as your interview skills. If you are submitting your resume online, it is a perfect opportunity to be able to customize your resume.

It might take you asking the contact for a business card to follow-up or seeing if the employer plans to follow-up with you.

You can only gain insight into what is the appropriate next step by asking. You don't want to be too pushy, but do be assertive.

When you know what that next step is, be sure if you are doing the follow-up that you make yourself a note and actually follow through in the given timeframe.

For those organizations that really impressed you or that you have interest in, consider a hand written thank you note to the contact. An e-mail will work too, but a hand written note gets more notice. You'll need to use your judgment based on the timeline you have. For example if you are interviewing the next day you would want to do an e-mail.

If the employer has said they'd be doing the follow-up and you have not heard back from them in the time period given, remember that these representatives are busy traveling to career fairs and connect with a lot of students.

Give them an additional week and if you still haven't heard from them, try reaching out to them via e-mail or phone. Ask if they could provide an update on where they are in their hiring process.

When leaving a career fair booth, don't be afraid to take promotional material that is offered. Don't go

overboard on taking all of the fun giveaways, but it is okay to take one if you'd like one. Companies have them there for a reason!

Be sure to say thank you to the company representative. It is a simple gesture, but makes a great impression!

Career fairs don't have to be overwhelming or stressful.



**Ask what the next steps are following the career fair when talking with a company recruiter. Don't be afraid to ask about a potential interview. Be sure to brush up on your interview skills as the next step in solidifying a successful career.**

With a little preparation and planning, you can go into a career fair confident and with purpose. Have an idea of what you want to do or at least a few options. Do your homework on the organizations that will be there. Be sure to practice your conversation starters and dress to impress.

Make the most out of a career fair and use the opportunity to explore the wide variety of jobs that the agriculture and food industries hold!

For further advice, e-mail AgCareers.com at [agcareers@agcareers.com](mailto:agcareers@agcareers.com).