

Stephen Says: “A Free Business Plan on an Interview? Yes or No?”

Dear Stephen:

I have been interviewing for a sales representative position with an international office furniture manufacturer for a multi-state sales territory here in North America.

I have gone through several interview steps, and now they have asked me to prepare and present 30-, 60-, and 90-days sales plans on how I would go about tackling the market and growing their business. No one mentioned this “deliverable step” in the earlier stages of the interviews. I guess I am a bit hesitant to share a free marketing plan and sales strategy with a company that may not have one and may not even be that serious about hiring me. Is this a common ask?

Actually, as I write this question, I remember a previous interview with a domestic leather company during which they asked for a stra-

tegic plan. They wanted a detailed plan of the accounts I would be targeting and how I would develop business.

Frankly, I was expecting the employer would have this plan in place and that I would explain how I would execute their plan. It just seems like I’m doing work for them before I even have the job. How many free ideas are they expecting I give away? I have been doing this for years and can easily prepare a business plan, should I? Am I just being paranoid?

Signed,

I Don’t Work for Free



You can send your workplace questions to Stephen at: StephenSays@bellow.press

Questions selected to be answered, will appear in this column. Please use the Subject: Stephen Says for all emails. Stephen Viscusi is a bestselling author, television personality, and CEO of The Viscusi Group, global executive recruiters located in New York. Follow Stephen on Twitter @stephenviscusi, Like Stephen on Facebook; and follow him on LinkedIn.

Dear Work for Free:

Good question and actually quite an easy one to answer. If you want to get high-level sales jobs, you must be able to create this type of plan. And many employers today want to know you can create one yourself, not just implement theirs. It’s a fair request. In fact, if you want the job your plan shouldn’t just be some template plan, but you should really wow them with your best. Now, I hear your reticence to put in all this free work. But let me try to explain it a bit. It is more and more common for every company-

If you have been living in a bubble go watch an episode of “Shark Tank.”

-manufacturers and dealers, both domestic and foreign, and sales organizations--to ask candidates today to create and present these business plans on how they will go about developing business over a three month period (often called a 30-60-90 plan). I know it’s an extra step, and your suspicion that they’re just getting you to do the work for them is understandable--and maybe sometimes it is even true. One really never knows. However, if you want the job they expect you to do it, without any questions.

As recruiters, when clients ask candidates for this, we wish they would tell them in the first interview that at some point in the process this step will be required. First, it gives the candidate a chance to prepare, and second, it allows the candidate to try to learn what the hiring company has already prepared. This is really important to a good interview

process. The salient point to remember is that if you have an excellent presentation and they like the ideas, they’ll probably hire you! From the hiring company’s perspective, they want to see that you can craft a vision, sell that vision, and execute that vision. Any good, reputable company--the only type of company that you should want to work for--will use these presentations in good faith. The truth is that you likely won’t have all the necessary information to really create an ideal plan for the company, anyway. They just want to see how you think.

Another element to consider is that when companies seem to spring this ask on candidates, it’s often because it wasn’t part of the initial plan (that’s a headhunter’s secret). Sometimes, the company is torn between two equally good finalists, and this step is used to separate those candidates.

That is why it often comes late in the process, why no one explains it, and why you need to do it if you want a the job. The better plan and presentation always get the job.

Lastly, it’s important to remember that there is very little original material left. Anything you’ll be presenting will probably be something that the company has considered, so while it makes sense that you don’t want to do free work for them, it’s unlikely they are picking your brain for free information--sorry to burst your ego. Instead, they want to see if you can articulate a vision in writing and if you have the skillset to get it done. If you have been living in a bubble go watch an episode of “Shark Tank.” You will get the idea of what a good presentation looks like and what a bad presentation looks like!

Stephen