



Your opening argument: how to respond when your interviewer says, “tell me something about yourself”

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Once you have an interview scheduled, you need to be able to answer the perennial threshold question: Tell me something about yourself. This article will explain how to best answer this question.

A few years ago, the New York *Times* featured a front-page picture of a personal injury lawyer advertising his skills in a television commercial. The attorney appeared as a prizefighter-in trunks and boxing gloves-slugging it out in a boxing ring with an actor posing as a legal opponent.

Most lawyers might hesitate to advertise their skills so blatantly. But many lawyers, while sensitive to the need of developing business and skilled in the subtle ways of promoting their legal services, remain blissfully ignorant of one the most effective techniques for marketing themselves in a job search: the profile statement.

The one query most often posed to legal job seekers is that overused expression: Tell me something about yourself. You hear it when you are screened over the phone after responding to a legal advertisement. Callers will ask, “Could you tell us a little bit more about your background?” You also detect it, although it is disguised in one way or another, during an actual job interview: Why don’t you just briefly run me through your background?

Successful salespeople often say that if you cannot compress the benefits of your product or service in 60 seconds or less, you’ll lose a sale. That is why it is so important to prepare a credible, well-scripted answer to the “Tell me something about yourself” question because it is an interview door-opener. If you do not have a well-prepared, 60-second answer to that threshold question and cannot recite it as if it were spontaneous and unrehearsed, you have stumbled badly. You have missed the opportunity right at the beginning of the interview to establish your credibility and let your audience hear your “music”-your energy, your enthusiasm-everything that makes you an interesting and attractive candidate.

Repeatedly, when asked the “Tell me something about yourself” question, lawyers pause and, no matter how articulate they may be professionally, bumble through their answers. They don’t make a good argument for themselves. Curiously, the diligence that lawyers always undertake for clients is often forgotten when making cases for themselves.

Stating Your Case

In introducing yourself-when you are screened over the phone, in the office of a potential legal employer, and especially during an interview with a hiring committee-it is critically important that you immediately establish your credibility. You must describe for your audience-as clearly and concisely as possible-your work history, your specific expertise, significant accomplishments,



educational background, and anticipated career direction. You can do this with a well-prepared “opening argument” that provides your audience with an excellent first impression and tells succinctly:

- Where you are coming from
- Where you want to go
- Your credentials to go there

Creating Your Profile Statement

There’s an easy way to develop your own “opening argument” for phone screenings and face-to-face interviews:

First, read some of the samples below. Think how you would describe some of the highlights of your own career, what you want to say, and how you would describe your legal experience.

Next, use the form below as your guide. However, before you write out your Profile Statement word-for-word, talk it through in your mind and listen to how you are describing your experience. Find words that fit, that sound right, and then write out this internal script and see how it looks, how it feels to you. Be sure that you are as concrete as possible. Paint a word picture.

Some Samples

An associate, in her mid-30s, seeking to transfer her credentials:

I am an attorney with significant experience in the Delaware Valley nonprofit community, including the Girl Scouts and the American Heart Association. In addition, I was Chair of last fall’s highly successful drive for the Battered Women’s Shelter. My law degree is from Syracuse University, and I’m a cum laude graduate of Bryn Mawr. Presently, I am an associate at the Bailey, Banks & Biddle law firm.

At Bryn Mawr, I designed a new alumni development campaign, recruited student volunteers, and managed a telemarketing event that realized approximately \$100,000 for the college development fund. Based upon my considerable experience in the nonprofit sector, I am considering a new direction in institutional development with either a United Way agency or a private foundation. I possess extensive local corporate and community contacts, and I would describe myself as a results-oriented professional who can identify objectives and achieve goals.

A partner from a failing commercial practice:

I presently provide direction and manage a comprehensive commercial and business practice as a partner in a 55-attorney civil litigation firm. I handle a broad range of issues, including products liability, professional malpractice, and employment discrimination. As managing partner, I introduced new computer and communication systems and streamlined case handling procedures, resulting in savings in excess of \$1 million annually. In this capacity, I also serve a diverse client base-including such companies as Ardmore Aeronautics, Bonato Designs, and Pelagian

Your Opening Argument:

continued



Pharmaceuticals-where I act as outside counsel and troubleshooter on a variety of concerns. My law degree is from Georgetown University, where I was on the law review, and I am also a graduate of Marquette University. Because of my firm's impending downsizing, I am seeking a position as in-house counsel in a small to mid-sized corporate entity.

Counsel for a municipal agency seeking a lateral move:

As counsel for the District of Columbia's Housing Authority (DCHA), I possess comprehensive experience in risk management, claims adjustment, and the oversight of a large Workman's Compensation program. In this position, I recently uncovered a \$500,000 fraud by a provider who was billing the agency for services never furnished. My law degree is from Rutgers University School of Law, Evening Division, and my B.A. is in Human Services from Antioch College. After eight successful years in my present position, I feel it's time for new challenges and am seeking a position in the corporate legal department of a major private security agency, where I can offer my superior abilities in compensation program management and pension and benefits oversight. I would describe myself as a dedicated administrator with comprehensive legal and management abilities.

Getting Started

Use the above "opening arguments" as guidelines, and write out your own Profile Statement. Just answer each question in about a paragraph, and then put your words together into one comprehensive statement.

Where have you been?

Where do you want to go?

What are your credentials to go there?

Practice Makes Perfect

When you have completed your script, read it aloud. Make it conversational. Record yourself and listen. Edit your Profile down to about one minute, and learn it verbatim. Do you tell a story? Do you paint a picture? At first, it may sound stilted or canned, but with a little practice, you will soon be giving it back naturally.

Practice, practice, practice. Learn it by heart and keep practicing until it becomes smoother, more spontaneous, and sounds unrehearsed. It could just be the greatest "opening argument" you will ever make.

Your Opening Argument: