

Learning by Listening to a Small Business

The questions below should be part of a conversation and flow naturally. They can be asked in any sequence, and other questions may be substituted. You are not here to seek a job, but to seek advice and information about the business. These questions are typically used when speaking with the owner of a business:

- Tell me about your business. What services or products do you offer?
- Tell me why you started your business. What lead you into this line of work?
- What other work might you have done if you didn't go into this line of work or start this business?
- What did your parents do for a living?
- What do you like best about your job/ your work?
- What is the hardest part of your job?
- What is the best part of your day?
- Is there anything that prevents your workflow from going smoothly?
- What are you most proud of with your business?
- What innovations are you making/have you made to your business?
- What type of equipment/technology can really help your business processes?
- How has technology impacted your business?
- What keeps you awake at night? What is your top concern?
- What's your biggest headache today, right now, regarding the work you do?
- If that issue could be solved in the next year, what would it take?
- How has your business changed over the past 5/10/15 years?

- How is your business or industry changing?
- Who are your competitors? Why do your customers choose you over your competitors?
- What makes you/your business unique?
- Tell me about your customers.
- How does the local economy impact your business?
- If money were no object, what would you need to grow your business/increase your productivity/improve your bottom-line?
- Where do you see your business in 5 years?
- Are there new products/services you wish to offer your customers, and if so what are they? What resources are needed to provide this service or product?
- Do you have any unmet needs – important tasks that aren't getting done regularly? If so, how does that work usually get completed?
- What advice do you have for anyone wanting to enter into this line of work?
- Are there other people or businesses you might recommend I speak with related to this line of work?
- Who should I be listening to so I can learn about the community's economic activities?

TIPS for meeting with businesses/owners/managers during Informational Interviews

1. Eye contact

When it comes to being a good listener, it's important for you to have eye contact with the other person. It shows that you are paying attention and engaged with the conversation. When you don't have eye contact with the other person, it shows that you don't care and are not interested in what they have to say. Practice having eye contact with the next person you have a conversation with.

2. Find the “Why” and “What”

For you to be a good listener, you need to find out the “Why” and “What.” Why are they talking to you and what is the message they are trying to share with you? Being a good

listener takes practice and when you are able to practice finding out the “Why and “What” of the other person, you will be much more engaged in the conversation.

3. Focus on the other person

It’s easy for us to think about what we want to say after the other person has stopped talking. This will not make you a better listener. If you are constantly thinking about your response, you will always miss out on carefully listening to the other person. Focus on what they have to say. Find out the “Why” and “What” and maintain eye contact. Once the other person stops talking, then think about your response. But while you are listening, you must be consciously listening with your ears. A lot of times, when we listen to people, we are thinking within our brain what we want to say rather than opening our ears and purely listening to their message.

4. Limit distractions

We live in a society that is filled with so many distractions. We are constantly listening to so much noise that it’s a challenge to truly listen to another person. In order for you to be a good listener, you need to limit distractions during your conversation, whether it is the television, telephones or interruptions. It takes a mental decision to limit distractions when you are listening to someone else. How can you possibly be a good listener if you have the television blasting or your phone continues to ring? It would be near to impossible to be a good listener with these distractions. Limit as much interruptions as you can when you are listening to someone else. This not only shows them that you care but you are practicing good social skills.

5. Engage

Engage yourself in the conversation. Being engaged is showing your attention towards the other person. Let the other person know that they have your attention and focus. When you are not engaged in the conversation, the other person will notice and will most likely not want to talk to you again. Show the other person that you care about them and are interested in what they have to say. One way you can show this is by responding with a short comment, such as “Yes” or “I understand.” This expresses to the other person that you are truly listening. Make sure that you allow the other person to primarily do the talking while you remain focused on what they are saying.