

How to answer the job interview question 'Sell me this pencil'

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You're [sitting in a job interview](#) ready to answer any question the hiring manager has about your qualifications and why you're a great fit for the job. Then he holds up his writing instrument and says, "Sell me this pencil."

This request is nearly as old as the job interview itself. It's a simple question—typically geared toward candidates for sales positions— but it can be difficult to answer. And you might be surprised to learn what the interviewer is hoping to hear.

"Most interviewers are screening for confidence and cogency," says Brett Cenkus, a Texas-based business consultant and lawyer who has trained sales professionals. In general, interviewers use this question to get a feel for your sales style and experience, he adds.

There are a few guidelines pros like Cenkus suggest you follow when crafting your response:

Ask questions, lots and lots of questions

The answer made famous in the movie *The Wolf of Wall Street*—in which stockbroker Jordan Belfort (played by Leonardo DiCaprio) asks a friend to sell him a pen. The friend takes the pen and asks Belfort to write his name down on a napkin. Belfort says he can't, he doesn't have a pen, and the friend says, "exactly"—is actually not the best approach in this real-life situation.

In fact, Belfort told Piers Morgan on CNN in 2014 that the best salespeople will ask questions before they try to sell anything.

Other experts agree the best response is one that starts with plenty of questions.

"An ideal response to a question like this would be for the sales rep to start asking penetrating questions about me and my business that would help them identify whether or not I really need a pencil in the first place," says Christopher Searles, president of New York-based Searles Media, who interviews sales candidates on a weekly basis. "Being able to successfully identify a prospect's needs is the single most important—and often most overlooked—aspect of being a good salesperson."

By asking questions, you can sell the pencil, not as a commodity, but as a solution to the buyer's problem.

You say: "I'd like to understand your needs surrounding pencils. What are you currently using to write with? Where do you most often use this writing instrument and what types of things do

you normally write? Are you happy with your current writing tools? If you were to consider another vendor for your writing implements, what would be important to you?"

Understand their needs—pivot if necessary

You're selling the pencil, and you ask the interviewer, "What are you currently using to write with?" His response is, "Nothing, I never write." What do you do next?

"Don't be afraid to say, 'Oh, sounds like you're not in the market for the pencil I'm selling. Do you know anyone who is?'" Cenkus says. "Don't waste time pitching to people who don't have any use for what you're selling."

Unless you're hoping to irritate someone into buying your pencil, don't keep pushing when the buyer says he doesn't need one.

***You say:** Since you have no use for this pencil I'm selling, is there someone else in your company who might need one?*

Keep the conversation going

Plan your conversation to avoid dead ends. One common trap: Starting your sales pitch by rattling off all wonderful qualities of the pencil. "The worst thing you could do in response to this question is to start selling me first without determining if you have something of value to offer me," Searles says.

Plus, after you list all the good things about the pencil, ask the interviewer if he wants to buy it, and he says no, you've run out of things to say, Cenkus says. Most applicants fizzle after this happens.

It's OK to fake your confidence a bit to keep the conversation flowing. That beats sitting in silence. "The worst thing an interviewee can do is not try," Cenkus says.

Farmer agrees. "The interviewer would see that as someone who is easily rattled and has the potential to fall apart in an unexpected situation."

***You say:** "Well, I'm sure we can find the right product to meet your needs. Would you like to review this pen? It's actually an upgrade from the pencil."*

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