

## Effectively Researching Companies and Using Findings To Impress Employers

When I ask students if they've researched a company in preparation for an interview, or before writing a cover letter, the answer I get is, "Yes, I looked at their web site." The next question I ask is, "What do you think the typical student would do to prepare for an interview?" "Look at the company's web site," is the reply. Then, my follow up question is, "How do you expect to differentiate yourself if your preparation is *comparable* to that of every other applicant?"

The bottom line is that you have a tremendous opportunity to differentiate yourself through the research you conduct prior to communicating with company executives. I've helped several students over the years successfully prepare for job interviews (which led to job offers) with one major local employer, Black & Decker and my advice is always the same.

Start with the company's web site to become familiar with product lines, distribution channels, new product launches and even company culture. Make sure to review "press releases" if they are available on-line since they often report on financial performance as well as product information.

From there, you should research the company through a *business periodical database* licensed by your University. Much of this information (full text articles on the company) will not be available through a Google search from your own computer. Not only do you want to locate articles written about the company, but you should also find trade periodicals which discuss industry trends that are pertinent to the business. Then, research the company's competitors.

Your "field" research for a company like Black & Decker should consist of visiting a minimum of two different channel members (retailers) to learn about how products are merchandised and to elicit feedback from a store manager on the role of the sales representative—i.e. how the sales representative works with the retailer and the characteristics of effective sales representatives. The displays you see and the feedback you get from the manager should be different at a Home Depot compared to a Sears or a smaller independent hardware store.

Once your research is complete, make sure to incorporate some key findings into your cover letter or interview. You need to do this subtly though, so that the recipient or interviewer recognizes your initiative, but you don't appear to be pretentious.

In an interview, one way to do this is by formulating a question that builds on a fact that you uncovered in your research. For example, you might ask about a competitor's reaction to a new product line the company has launched. Or, you might ask about competitors' distribution channels, if you noticed that competitive offerings differed at the retailers you visited.

By conducting thorough research that is evident to the prospective employer, you not only illustrate your level of interest and initiative, you illustrate your research abilities and a work ethic that may not be matched by other applicants.

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