Many employers use career fairs—both on and off campus—to promote their opportunities and to pre-screen applicants. Career fairs come in all shapes and sizes, from small community-sponsored events to giant regional career exposions held at major convention centers.

Most career fairs consist of booths and/or tables staffed by recruiters and other representatives from each organization. For on-campus events, some employers also send alumni representatives. Large corporations and some government agencies have staffs who work the career fair “circuit” nationwide.

An employer’s display area is also subject to wide variance. It could be a simple table with a stack of brochures and business cards and a lone representative or an elaborate multimedia extravaganza with interactive displays, videos, posters and a team of recruiters.

Many employers who advertise their presence at career fairs provide a brochure or some sort of note-taking device (paper or pad). Keep track of the recruiters with whom you speak and send follow-up notes to the ones who interest you. Don’t bring your backpack; it’s cumbersome for you and it gets in the way of others.

Keep your eyes and ears open—there’s nothing wrong with subtly eavesdropping on the questions asked and answers received by your fellow career fair attendees. You might pick up some valuable information, in addition to witnessing some real-life career search “do’s and don’ts.”

In order to maximize your career fair experience, you must be an active participant and not just a browser. If all you do is stroll around, take company literature and load up on the ubiquitous freebies, you really haven’t accomplished anything worthwhile unless you’re a collector of key chains, mousepads and pocket flashlights. It is essential to chat with the company representatives and ask meaningful questions.

Create a one-minute “commercial” as a way to sell yourself to an employer. This is a great way to introduce yourself. The goal is to connect your background to the organization’s need. In one minute or less, you need to introduce yourself, demonstrate your knowledge of the company, express enthusiasm and interest and relate your background to the company’s need.

The questions you ask at a career fair depend upon your goals. Are you interested in finding out about an internship or full-time job? Then focus your questions on the application and interview process, and ask for specific information about that employer.

By all means, try to attend at least one career fair before beginning your formal job interviewing process. For new entrants into the professional career marketplace, this is a good way to make the transition into “self-marketing mode” without the formality and possible intimidation of a one-on-one job interview. It’s an opportunity that’s too valuable to miss.

1. Don’t interrupt the employer reps or your fellow job-seekers. If someone else is monopolizing the employer’s time, try to make eye contact with the rep to let him or her know that you’re interested in speaking. You may be doing a favor by giving the recruiter an out. If all else fails, move to the next exhibit and plan to come back later.

2. If you have a real interest in an employer, find out the procedures required to secure an interview. At some career fairs, initial screening interviews may be conducted on the spot. Other times, the career fair is used to pre-screen applicants for interviews to be conducted later (either on campus or at the employer’s site).

3. Sincerity always wins. Don’t lay it on too thick, but don’t be too blasé either. Virtually all employers are looking for candidates with good communication skills.

4. Don’t just drop your resume on employers’ display tables. Try to get it into a person’s hands and at least say a few words. If the scene is too busy and you can’t get a word in edgewise, jot a note on your resume to the effect of, “You were so busy that we didn’t get a chance to meet. I’m very interested in talking to you.” Look around the display for the recruiter’s business card or add your name and the title of your position and send a follow-up note and copy of your resume. If someone else is monopolizing the spot, try to get it into a person’s hands and at least say a few words. If the scene is too busy and you can’t get a word in edgewise, jot a note on your resume to the effect of, “You were so busy that we didn’t get a chance to meet. I’m very interested in talking to you.” Look around the display for the recruiter’s business card or add your name and the title of your position and send a follow-up note and copy of your resume.

5. If you know ahead of time that one of your “dream companies” is a career fair participant, do some prior research (at minimum, visit their website). A little advance preparation goes a long way and can make you stand out among the masses of other attendees.

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NAME

MAJOR AND CLASS YEAR

SKILLS GAINED FROM EXPERIENCE(S)

(Career Interest(s) customized depending on the field the employer/networking contact represents)

END QUESTION
to gain more information.

“Hi, my name is ____. I’m a (graduate student, junior, etc.) at the University of Maryland majoring in ____. My interest in ____ has developed through ____ (i.e., describe internships, in-class projects, part-time work experiences, etc.).”

Continue by answering the recruiter’s questions. Ex. “What type of job are you seeking?” Do NOT answer “Anything” or “It doesn’t matter.”

End with a question or request: “When do you anticipate accepting applications for your summer internship?” or “May I contact you if I have additional questions?”

Networking Scenario

“Hi! My name is Mary Land. I’m a senior Psychology major at the University of Maryland. I’ve completed a broad range of psychology courses, my focus being on interpersonal relationships and cross-cultural psychology. My interests led me to complete a 100-hour internship related to Human Resources, researching discrimination claims, assisting payroll with paperwork and developing questions for employee interviews. The internship strengthened my analytical, problem-solving and communication skills and confirmed that I’m very interested in going into the field post-graduation. Can you tell me more about your Human Resource Department or suggest a colleague I may speak more with?”

Career Fair Scenario

“Hello, I’m Terra Pinn. I’m a junior English major. I’m hoping to work in public relations. I noticed that you posted a PR internship on Careers4Terps. Currently I work as a part-time sales associate at a large department store. I love working in retail. Now I’m hoping to move into the corporate side in a PR role. Would you tell me a little more about your internship?”