How to Hire a Hotelie: Communication Throughout the Selection Process

Amy Newman
Senior Lecturer, Management Communication

Hospitality employers who recruit at The Cornell School of Hotel Administration want the best students for internships and full-time positions. General advice from organizations, such as the National Association of Colleges and Employers,¹ is accessible and useful, but the selection process is part science, part art. Recruiters and hiring managers make critical communication decisions at every step that affect not only whether students accept an offered position but how students talk about the employer to their extensive network of Hotelie friends. What impresses students, and what turns them off?

In a 2012 Center for Hospital Research report, Kim and Sturman discuss the importance of HR branding for hospitality companies, with lessons from product and service branding:

> In the same way that branding influences customers from the attraction stage, to the initial purchase, to long-term loyalty, individuals’ perceptions of an organization’s brand can influence human resources from attraction, to selection, to retention.²

Communication from the job posting to the signed offer letter or rejection email is fragile and nuanced. Our students are ambitious and diverse; they also can be awkward and sensitive. An unreturned email, a quizzical look during an interview, or a delayed offer can demoralize a student and push her to join her second-choice company.

The recommendations and examples in this article emerged from input from The Career Management Office at The Cornell School of Hotel Administration and from current and former undergraduates when asked about their experiences with companies that recruit at the school. Best practices and missteps are identified at four stages in the selection process (see Figure 1):

- Scheduling Interviews and Visits
- Interviewing On Campus and Off
- Communicating Rejections
- Extending Job Offers

Scheduling Interviews and Visits

Flexibility in work arrangements is a core value of Millennial workers, so giving students choices during the interview process may be an employer’s first test in meeting applicants’ expectations. Students have busy schedules, and theoretically, classes take priority. Most instructors are understanding when students get an interview—and everyone has an attendance policy with reasonable allowances for absences—but last-minute appointments and limited options put students in a tough spot. If a student gets a call for her dream job interview for the next day, when she’s scheduled to deliver a presentation, what should she do? Employers who respect students’ tight schedules give a few days’ notice and some options for days and times. As one student said, “[The company’s] flexibility allowed me to complete the interviews with few disruptions to my own plans.”

Cornell also has recruiting policies to help companies schedule interviews to accommodate students.

Booking.com sends applicants an extensive "brochure" about its interview process. In a PowerPoint file, recruits receive an interview schedule with names, titles, and locations; suggestions for what to wear; and links to company history, the hiring process, directions, the weather, and information about living and working locally.

When logistics are well planned, students are more relaxed and feel valued. A student tells of a "seamless" process at Hilton Worldwide in McLean, VA, with the company making travel arrangements after asking for preferred days.

Following are tips identified from students’ experiences with the recruiting process. In addition, employers are expected to follow the University’s policies for hiring Cornell students (http://www.career.cornell.edu/employers/hiring_students/recruiting/policies.cfm).

Figure 1: How to Hire a Hotelie

Scheduling Interviews and Visits

- Give notice and offer flexibility in scheduling interviews and visits
- Provide detailed travel, dress, and interview information
- Pay for travel, lodging, and meals
- Flag reservations at company hotel properties

Interviewing On Campus and Off

- Set a welcoming tone and familiarize yourself with students in advance
- Ask behavioral interview questions for hospitality students

Communicating Rejections

- Stay in touch with students throughout the selection process
- Set realistic timeframes for replies—and meet your commitments
- Offer constructive feedback to help students improve
- Respond to all applicants; never “ghost” a student

Extending Job Offers

- Communicate offers clearly; help students understand what is binding and what is not
- Call students with good news and leave clear voice mails
- Provide at least two weeks for students to decide whether to accept an offer
- Get offer letters out quickly after a verbal offer is accepted

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4 Email Response from Student to Author, received August 11, 2016


6 Email Response from Student to Author, received July 15, 2016.
and times. Several students mention staying in upscale hotels, particularly the recruiting company's own flagship property, such as Hersha's Rittenhouse and Goldman Sachs' Conrad.

As you can imagine, students also enjoy going to nice restaurants and having breakfast and lunch provided. More important is paying for their interview travel expenses. Students report smaller companies inviting them to visit but not offering to pay. This puts students who can’t afford to travel at a disadvantage, which raises questions of fairness and decision making: is the best candidate the one who can pay his own way?

Although students appreciate being wined and dined, hotel reservations should be appropriately flagged. One student reported being walked without luggage assistance when she arrived at midnight at the recruiting company's own hotel:

The company I was interviewing with obviously didn't care too much if they put me in a hotel and didn’t give them any sort of heads up not to walk me, and they must have severely overbooked so that’s not a good sign of their management either. I just felt extremely unloved from that point on, and I had no motivation during my interview the next day.

In these examples, companies send strong signals about their HR brand—how managers care for their prospective and current employees.

Interviewing On Campus and Off

A company's HR brand is communicated throughout the selection process. However, most often, a student's first personal connection with the company (in person, by video, or, less frequently now, by phone) is the interview. To the student, the interviewer is the brand.

Setting the Tone

An interview gives an employer more information about a student's skills and experience and helps determine organizational fit: is this person right for our company? An interview also informs the student: do I want to work for this company?

Kim and Sturman suggest ways employers can build a positive HR brand:

At an individual level, apply the service standards of the company to job applicant. For example, during interviews, avoid making candidates wait and wonder, and promptly inform them of their status. Most important, do not raise expectations that cannot be fulfilled.

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7 Email Response from Student to Author, received August 8, 2016.
8 Email Response from Student to Author, received August 6, 2016.
9 Email Response from Student to Author, received August 6, 2016.
Some recruiters, perhaps because they are inexperienced or because they don't want to give a false impression, "come across as impersonal or cold," as one student said. Although they may conduct a structured interview (meaning, a standardized process), interviewers should take time to make students feel comfortable. Students are already nervous. Upper-level, female students experience more interview anxiety than other candidates, and companies may miss out on the best hire because of misinterpreted signals, for example, short responses to questions. Also, having some familiarity with the student's resume and background will make them feel more highly valued and less like "just a number," which one student called "a major turnoff." Students also report “stress interviews,” and the results are rarely positive, as one student explains:

“It became clear pretty quickly after a string of expletives by the interviewer within the first 5 minutes that this would not be your average interview. . . . I certainly froze up during this interview and was totally turned off of the firm after leaving the conversation, fearing everyone there had the same mentality.”

Asking the Best Questions

Many recruiters at The School of Hotel Administration focus on behavioral interview questions. These questions help employers test students' experience in real situations. A 2002 Center for Hospitality Research report confirmed the adage "past performance predicts future performance." Although performance changes over time, and companies have better data about internal than external candidates, the best we can do during an interview is to find out how students behaved in past situations that are similar to situations the job requires.

Past-behavior questions ("Tell me about a time when...") have different purposes and outcomes than situational, or hypothetical, questions ("How would you handle..."). Authors of a 2014 article in Personnel Psychology describe behavioral questions as "measuring experience and perhaps some personality facets," while situational questions "primarily measure[e] job knowledge or cognitive ability." Both are recommended, but behavioral questions are slightly better predictors of job performance.

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11 Email Response from Student to Author, received August 7, 2016
13 Email Response from Student to Author, received August 6, 2016.
14 Email Response from Student to Author, received August 25, 2016.
17 Sturman, et al., 2016
Further, a study of undergraduates found more prevalence of "deceptive image management" (that is, faking accomplishments) with situational questions than for behavioral questions.\(^{19}\)

Which behavioral questions are best for hospitality students? Sample questions in nine competency areas are listed in Attachment 1. Competencies were selected from core management competencies, job descriptions in Cornell’s job posting system, and a review of studies in the past 25 years that asked managers what hospitality management program graduates need to be successful in the industry.\(^{20}\)

**Communicating Rejections**

Students know they won’t get every job they want—and they don’t even want every job for which they apply. Rejections are part of the process, and they can be managed to reflect positively on the company brand or negatively, partly depending on the timing and how the bad news is conveyed.

**Getting the Timing Right**

People talk about "ghosting" in the online dating world: you meet someone a few times, seem to like each other, and then one "disappears"—no amount of texts, emails, Facebook messages, or phone calls revive the person or the fledging relationship.

By far, the most common student complaints about the recruiting process are about late replies or not hearing back at all after one, two, or even three rounds of interviews with a company. It doesn’t seem to matter whether students were referred by an alum, applied online, or met a recruiter at the school Career Fair, as this student describes:

> "I interviewed the next morning. My friend took her out to dinner, and the interviewer told him that she loved me and that we bonded. I ended up getting a second phone interview. I also had to fill out two personality tests. I sent my thank-you emails and kept in touch and showed interest in the position. I didn’t hear back from them for a while, so I sent an email asking when we would find out the decisions. She said the company was working on budgeting and that I would find out in a week. I never heard back again. The previous intern received another offer, but no one else I knew that applied heard back from them. It was really irritating because I was so excited for the internship, and it seemed as if I had a really good shot at it…but apparently not. I would like to say they were too embarrassed to tell me they couldn’t fit it into their budget, and that’s why I never heard back at all. It’s just rude."\(^{21}\)

Of course, students may overestimate their success during an interview. But universally, students say they would like to receive a rejection instead of no communication at all. After a thank-you note or

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\(^{21}\) Email Response from Student to Author, received August 6, 2016
follow-up email, they deserve some response so they can move on with their search—and tell their friends "I didn't make it" rather than "I never heard back from ABC" or "I'm still waiting to hear from XYZ." They seem to remember the painful lack of communication for years.

Delayed responses also frustrate our students. A company promises an answer by some date, and the email comes weeks later, as this student describes:

“After one final round interview, the firm notified me via email that they will be reaching out with decisions within two weeks. When I called the appropriate recruiter after three weeks of no news, I was simply told someone would be in touch soon. Yet it was not until the fifth week and another email to the recruiter when they notified me of my decision. I understand that companies receive a large pool of applicants and do not have the time to reject each individual personally; however, a promised deadline for final decisions should be kept or not specified at all.”

Students can be idealistic: they hold out hope for their favorite company and may forgo other opportunities while waiting. And employers may miss out on their first-choice candidate if other offers come more quickly—or if the recruiter is in closer communication with the student. Employers would be better served if their timelines were realistic, and if they kept in contact with frequent, honest updates.

Giving Constructive Feedback

Most companies are understandably concerned about giving detailed feedback to job candidates: they fear being sued for comments that sound discriminatory ("You were articulate but weren't as polished as the other candidates") or getting stuck in a debate with the applicant's qualifications.

But students are still learning—about the world of work, about companies, and about themselves. The selection process is the perfect opportunity to help students hone their skills, particularly those who may be at a disadvantage during the hiring process. A student from a hospitality family may have far more experience speaking with business people than someone who doesn't share this background or who speaks English as a second language.

Kristin LiBritz, director of career management for The School of Hotel Administration, encourages employers to share concerns about students with career advisors: “We always appreciate the opportunity to give students feedback. With recruiter feedback, I've been able to talk with a student about her concept of personal space. She was 'hovering' over the recruiters at the career fair and didn't realize she was making them feel uncomfortable.” Suggestions for more work experience or coursework and for making a better impression will help students prepare for future interviews. Could they give better examples to demonstrate certain competencies? Did they turn off managers by how they described a past job? Did they sound disinterested, tentative, or arrogant? Mock interviews help students turn mediocre interviews for internships into excellent interviews for full-time positions. In the end, Kristin says, “Employers who give students a second chance may see a lot of growth after a year.”

22 Email Response from Student to Author, received August 11, 2016
Extending Job Offers

The job offer process can get messy. Kristin LiBritz describes two common miscommunications:

- At some point during the interview process, a recruiter asks a student, "Would you take an offer if you received one?" The student answers affirmatively, and thinks it's a done deal, but the recruiter was just trying to gauge interest.
- A student accepts a verbal offer, and the employer thinks it's binding. Before the employer sends a written offer letter, the student gets another, preferred position.

In both situations, communication could be clearer. Recruiters need to understand students' inexperience with the process and make clear that the first question is only hypothetical and that final decisions haven't yet been made. Better yet, employers could avoid this question, which puts students in an uncomfortable position: to promise a decision before an offer is extended.

To avoid the second situation, as discussed earlier, companies need to act more quickly in sending offer letters. Whatever internal process holds up these final documents—and we hear many examples of students "waiting for an offer letter"—the delay deflates the student's enthusiasm, damages the company's image, and could make the company vulnerable to losing a new hire. A student describes his reaction to a delayed offer letter:

“During a phone call with a company, I received an informal offer which I then also verbally accepted. My formal written offer, however, was not sent to me until two months later. I remember growing increasingly uneasy and uncertain during these two months of stalled communication, and such lack of clarity or timeliness could easily push candidates to pursue other interviews and offers.”

Students appreciate personal phone calls with job offers. As one student said, "Not sure if this was a sales tactic, but she told me how I got the first phone call because the company viewed me as the top candidate. Her message made me feel good, and I ended up accepting the offer.”

Most students have surprisingly little experience talking on the phone. They communicate via text and social media. Phone calls mean a lot to them, so one way to distinguish your company is to call instead of email a student. But a student may be anxiously waiting for "The Call" and receive a voice mail during class: "Hi Joanne. This is Ron from XYZ. Please call me back when you can." What does this mean? If Joanne can't get back in touch with Ron soon, she may spend the rest of her day wondering whether it's good or bad news—and she may have other interviews or offers pending. A better approach is to simply add to a voice mail, "I have good news!"

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23 Email Response from Student to Author, received August 11, 2016
24 Email Response from Student to Author, received August 8, 2016
Another issue is, again, with timing. Although some employers are slow presenting offers, they may want a quick decision, even though it’s against Cornell University policy, in most cases, to give less than two weeks.25 One student described an "exploding offer" she received:

She offered me the job right away and told me I only had 2 days to give her an answer. Although I heard back early in the internship process, it wasn't my first choice and she gave me NO time to make a decision. I ended up having to deny the offer because I was waiting on other offers.26

Exploding offers reflect poorly on a company’s culture and may cause a domino effect, forcing other employers to do the same.

For their part, students may accept offers and then renege, which puts the company in a difficult position as well. Universities typically have varying levels of consequence for students who engage in this behavior; at Cornell, for example, this may result in terminating a student’s access to future Cornell career services. However, if an employer requires a response from a student that falls outside of the University’s hiring policy, and then the student reneges, the student may not face any consequences at all.

Summary

No company is perfect. Even Google, long admired for its employment practices, promised a School of Hotel Administration student he would hear within two weeks of an interview, but it was closer to a month.27

Millennials are often criticized for their work ethic; during the selection process, however, what our students think of as common courtesy doesn’t seem valued by employers. On its “How We Hire” webpage, Google includes this FAQ and answer:

Question: “Will you let me know when a job has been filled?”

Answer: “If you haven’t heard from us in two months about an application, we likely proceeded with other candidates for that particular role. However, our recruiters might reach out if we find a different potential match for your skills, interests, and experience.”28

In other words, no news is bad news.

Good communication at all important touch points with students—while scheduling and conducting interviews and when rejecting an applicant or extending an offer—could be the deciding factor in a student’s acceptance. Communication throughout the selection process also reflects on your HR brand, which could affect the company’s candidate pool for years to come.

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25 Cornell Career Services.
26 Email Response from Student to Author, received August 6, 2016
Attachment 1: Sample Behavioral Interview Questions

Customer Service

Tell me about a recent situation in which you had to deal with a very upset customer or coworker.

Describe a time when you had to bend a policy to accommodate a customer. What happened?

What was the best customer interaction you have had?

Can you give me an example of when you had to escalate a customer situation to your manager?

Decision Making

Give me an example of a time when you had to make a split-second decision.

Tell me about a difficult decision you’ve made in the last year.

I’d like to hear about your decision-making process. Can you walk me through a decision you made recently?

Can you tell me about a decision you regret?

Initiative

Give me an example of work you took on that was outside your job responsibilities.

I’d like to hear a time when you showed initiative or took the lead on something.

Describe a time when you stepped up to do work that you didn’t want to do.

Tell me about a time when you anticipated a problem.

Tell me about a change you initiated in a job.

Persuasion/Influence

Tell me about one of your most successful attempts to influence others to accept your point of view.

Describe a situation when you convinced your boss to do something he or she originally resisted.

I’d like to hear about a time when you tried to persuade someone to do something differently, but they didn’t comply.

Describe a time when you relied mostly on emotions to persuade someone.
Problem Solving

Tell me about a time when you were assigned work that you didn't know how to do or had difficulty completing on your own.

Describe a problem you've had on the job and tell how you went about solving it.

Give me a specific example of a time when you used good judgment and logic in solving a problem.

I'd like to hear an example of when you messed up—we all do at some point. How were you able to recover?

Relationship Building/Interpersonal Skills

Tell me about a time when you had to work with someone you didn’t like.

Describe the best working relationship you’ve had. What did you do to make it successful?

Describe a time when it was particularly difficult for you to gain credibility with someone. What did you do?

Can you tell me a time when you worked with someone who was different from you. How did you manage to work together?

I'd like to hear an example of a conflict you had with someone.

Teamwork

Sometimes teams go off track when working toward a specific project or goal. Describe a time when this happened and you were able to help your team get back on track. What did you do?

Tell me about a time when you had to step in to help a group or team complete a task/project/assignment. What did you do?

What was your most challenging situation when working as part of a team?

Describe a time when you led a team. What did you do that was successful, and what would you do differently today?

Time Management/Project Management

Tell me about a complex project you worked on. How did you coordinate with different people or manage information from different sources?

Can you give me an example of a strict deadline you faced and how you handled it?

Tell me about a time when you had too many things to do and you were required to prioritize your tasks.
Work Ethic/Integrity

Tell me about a time when you didn't do what you promised (or you didn't follow through on a commitment)?

Tell me about a time when you had to cut corners in order to finish a project or meet a manager’s expectations.

Can you give me an example of when you didn’t agree with a policy or procedure?

Tell me about a time when you missed a deadline. How did it happen, and what was the result?

Can you think of a time when you had to go above and beyond the call of duty in order to get a job done?

Describe a task you truly disliked and how you handled it.

Tell me about a time when your manager or client asked you to do something that you didn’t think was appropriate. How did you respond?