

Interviews - Handling Unwavering Questions

With no disrespect to Governor Sarah Palin (after all, she ran for Vice President and I did not), this is a classic example of how NOT how to handle unwavering interview questions. ¹

Katie Couric: *“And when it comes to establishing your worldview, I was curious, what newspapers and magazines did you regularly read before you were tapped for this to stay informed and to understand the world?”*

Governor Palin: *“I’ve read most of them, again with a great appreciation for the press, for the media.”*

Couric: *“What, specifically?”*

Palin: *“Um, all of them, any of them that have been in front of me all these years.”*

Couric: *“Can you name a few?”*

...that’s where she broke down completely, with the response to this last probe being something about how Alaska is a microcosm of America, which only succeeded in giving the press and media fodder for amusement.

If Sarah Palin had named a few newspapers, would she now be Vice President? Of course not; there obviously was a lot more to the election than being able to recite which newspapers she read, but this is a good example of an interview gaffe for a number of reasons, and you can take away several good lessons from this exchange.

Learn all the common interview questions. Prepare & rehearse your responses.

Regardless if you are the lowest-level worker or a senior executive, anyone can hesitate during an interview. You may be nervous; your mind may be formulating a response to what you believe will be the interviewer’s next question; you may be preoccupied by other concerns. In other words, you may stumble for a variety of reasons, but there is no excuse for not being prepared.

“How do you stay current in your field?” is a common interview question. Prepare for it.

Develop skills to defuse these types of questions with a clever response, even though it may not be an exact answer.

Though I do not know her personally, I have no doubts that Governor Palin reads newspapers and magazines. As busy as she may have been, the campaign trail was littered with an abundance of Wall Street Journals, Washington Posts, Financial Times, New York Times, and loads of others.

These are respectable and common titles in the media, so citing these would not have been second-guessed by Couric, and also would probably not have been an incorrect response, even if most

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of Governor Palin's information came from an army of advisors who read the papers cover-to-cover and fed her the synopsis with each morning's coffee.

Know when to cut your losses and simply acknowledge that do not have an answer.

You may not have an answer to each interview question. In most cases, this will be okay but never try to fake your way through the answer. Trained interviewers will see through this immediately and form a judgmental opinion of you, and not a favorable one. Feigning a response will only hurt your chances of moving to the next step in the process.

Use the Thank You letter to fill in the blanks.

While the Couric / Palin dialogue was not a typical job interview requiring a formal follow-up letter expressing gratitude, the job seeker should always send a thank you letter. Among other things, the thank you letter is used to shore up answers that were less than adequate during the actual interview.

Dear Ms. Couric,

Thank you for taking the time out of your busy schedule to interview me for the position of Vice President at USA, Inc.

I share your view that the successful candidate will be one who can quickly assimilate and adapt to the diverse and ever changing demands in the nation and the world.

My ability to grasp rapidly changing facts and circumstances, and revise my priorities accordingly, is one of the things that I do well. Our meeting did not allow sufficient time for me to elaborate on examples, so I would like to use this opportunity to share some of them with you. I read newspapers...!!!

Sincerely,

Governor Sarah Palin

That last line was obviously a joke, but you get the idea of how to use the Thank You letter to fill in the blanks from an unimpressive interview.



Regardless if you are in a formal job interview or simply in an everyday conversation or debate, you will be thrown unswerving questions from time to time. Some of these you will be able to handle with ease, but there will always be some that you can neither answer nor evade.

Anticipate and prepare are the best ways of handling these, but knowing how to defuse the question and reposition your response to a later time will allow the conversation to move on successfully.

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1. Excerpt from Katie Couric interview with Governor Sarah Palin on September 30, 2008.