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How to Research a Target Company

You have identified a company for which you want to work. Your first objective is to get an interview—a sales call—with the highest-level decision maker in the company. To get that interview you must demonstrate how you can benefit the company. To determine how you can benefit the company requires diligent and resourceful homework and research. Do your homework as if you were the CEO of the company and were thinking, “How can I improve this company? How can I grow sales, increase profits, cut costs, speed up innovation?” With these guiding thoughts, the goal of your research of the company is to discover ideas, suggestions, observations that could lead to economic improvement.

Whether your expertise is in manufacturing, sales, accounting, research and development (R&D), or anything at all, conduct your research as if you were in charge of that function; and also answer the question, “How can I improve the production process, in order to shorten deliveries, improve product quality, reduce scrap?” Or, “How can I improve marketing, finance, human resources?” and so on.

There are numerous sources of information about nearly every company. Information is in the library, in stores, in retired employees, in databases, on the Internet. You want to learn all you can about the company, its people, its products, its markets, its competition, and its future.

If you follow the research routes (outlined here) you will learn more about the company than is known by most of the company’s

employees. No other candidate competing for the same job will do this research.

1. Call the company and request sales literature, annual reports, technical information, product brochures, price lists. You may have to say you are a potential customer, a possible investor, or a consultant doing research for a client interested in buying product. These are all possibly true statements.
2. If the product is available at retail, visit the stores. Buy the product if affordable, use the product. Talk to store personnel. Get the names of the salespeople who sell to the stores. Get the store's opinion on the company, ideas for new products, what competitors are doing.
3. If the product is sold through a distribution system, visit a local distributor. Ask about the quality of the product, the skill and training of the sales force, new market opportunities, technical support.
4. If the product is sold directly to customers, call some. Ask the customers' opinions on delivery, reputation, innovation, sales force, warranty issues.
5. Call the company's 800 number. Analyze the experience.
6. Call the company's advertising agency and talk to the account executive responsible for the client. Ask where you can see or hear the advertising. Find out at what trade shows the company exhibits.
7. There are magazines for nearly every industry. Call the magazines and get articles on the company. Whether or not your target company is a member of a trade association, there are often such associations that can provide good information.
8. Talk to salespeople and employees of the company and of its competitors. Talk to ex-employees of the company and competitors.
9. Get the competitors' literature.

10. Call suppliers to the company and to the industry. If the company makes chewing gum, talk to people who sell flavors. If the company makes the entire product in-house, talk to people who supply services such as printing or sales automation.
11. Lexis-Nexis is a good Internet search engine to use when your target company's name has appeared in print.

When doing your research, constantly ask about problems, changes in the marketplace, areas to improve, trends that affect the company, new product ideas.

You now are prepared to write a compelling impact letter to the company's CEO. Develop an effective show piece for your interviews. Craft thoughtful needs-analysis questions for your interviews. Then hit the road running when you are hired.