

STYBEL PEABODY & ASSOCIATES, INC.



Laurence Stybel, Ed.D., and Maryanne Peabody, MBA, founded Stybel Peabody Associates, Inc.

Seize New Opportunities with Starbucks Research

Success, caffeine, and information.

Your educational degree and technical competence merely give you the opportunity to compete. Winning requires something that separates you from your competition.

That “something” is called Primary Research.

Secondary research is looking at newspaper stories, annual reports, social media. Primary Research is about talking with people.

Below is a case of how we assisted a COO using primary research:

Our client was a Chief Operations Officer who interviewed for a job reporting to the CEO of a private consumer products company. The CEO's message was that the company was doing well but there was always room for improvement. The CEO asked why my client was interested in being considered for the role.

Below is the client's response:

“I've done some research about your company. Last year, you decided to outsource component manufacturing from the United States to Vietnam. Your key customers have been complaining about defective parts and late delivery. Wal-Mart has put you on probation. I have been dealing with manufacturing in Asia and global logistics is a key strength of mine. I believe I can add value to this company as a member of your team.”

The CEO stammered, “How do you know all this??!!!”

My client smiled and said, “I do my homework.”

He got the job.

Primary Research:

There are two kinds of research. Secondary research refers to information about organizations and individuals you can obtain by reading material written by others. This can be of great value when you are seeking to gain opportunities with public companies. Most of your opportunities, however, are going to be with privately held companies or nonprofits. Secondary research might have only limited value with private companies.

Primary research refers to direct conversations face-to-face, by email, or over the phone. Few of your competitors take the time to conduct primary research.

Use their lack of initiative as a competitive tool to help you win.

In this article, we discuss six issues: (1) find a Starbucks (2) Your Script. (3) Your Three Questions (4) managing skeptical employees. (5) managing open

employees (6) convert information in your head into notes (6) limits of this technique.

Find a Starbucks:

By “Find a Starbucks,” we mean any coffee shop where local employees often stop to pick up morning beverage prior to going to work. In many cases, it will be the Starbucks near the company location. In some cases, it means a coffee shop in the building.

Visit the facility at 7:30am and make friends with the cashier or a Barista. Explain that you are here to gather information about a specific company to help you secure a job or land a sale. Could the Barista point out someone who works at the company to help you?

Many of them are proud to do so: it is a demonstration of how well they know their customers.

Your Script:

Prepare a standardized script and set of questions to ask each person you meet. I recommend you bring no notes with you. Focus on building a relationship.

Below is a sample script:

“My name is Robin Jones, and I am going to be interviewing Eileen Smith for an opening in her department. I am trying to put my best foot forward for the interview and also trying to determine if this company is a good fit for me.

“Would you be willing to answer one question?”

My question is “Tell me what you like and dislike about working at this company.”

Managing Skeptical Employees:

Most employees will react to your request with skepticism. They may refuse to cooperate or simply mouth platitudes. Thank them for their assistance. Do not ask for their name. Move on to the next person.

You hit “pay dirt” when your request is greeted with a smile and the person is eager to speak with you. That eagerness may be to describe how wonderful the company is and/or how special your potential boss is. Under these circumstances, ask for the employee’s name. This is a win for you and a win for the employee.

You can also hit “pay dirt” in another way.

Your request is also greeted with a smile and the person is eager to speak with you. But this person wants to tell you how awful things are. You listen with respect and do not ask for the person’s name.

Remember that one comment from one employee does not prove anything.

If you get confirmation from other sources using the same open-ended questions, you now have an important piece of information.

Convert Your Information to Notes:

At the conclusion of each interview you want to quickly convert your memories into notes. If you interview three people in one morning, your recollection will be hazy by the afternoon.

Use the digital recorder of your mobile phone to quickly dictate notes. You can then transcribe when you get home.

Limitations of this Technique:

In some corporate cultures, the very act of collecting information will be seen in a positive light: you are taking initiative, conducting appropriate diligence about a major decision in your life, etc. That positive response is an expression of positive corporate values.

Those same actions could also be perceived by the company as negative: you are a snoop, you are wasting employees’ time, you don’t accept the validity of what you have been told by authority figures, etc. That negative reaction also is a valid expression of corporate values.

In other words, the company's reaction to your having collected data is itself useful data about corporate culture.

When You Should NOT Engage in Research.

You may be going for an interview and have been told that the search is "confidential." For example, the current incumbent is unaware that a search firm has been hired to find a replacement. If a search is "confidential," you have an ethical obligation to respect it.

Under these circumstances, you cannot conduct primary research. When there is a position with multiple incumbents, it is unlikely that a particular search is confidential.

Stybel Peabody provides companies with "leadership and career success" for valued senior level talent. Core services include retained search for leaders on Boards or whose jobs touch Boards (Board members, CEOs, COOs, CFOs), leadership coaching, and executive-level outplacement for leaders

who should be networking with Board members.

The readers of *Massachusetts Lawyers Weekly* voted Stybel Peabody Associates, Inc. “Best Outplacement Firm” in 2020, 2019, 2018, and 2017.

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