Introduction
The key to a successful job interview is to convince the interviewer that by hiring you, he will benefit directly. Sure, the skills, expertise and experience you bring are important. Personality also plays a role. But the one thing that will get you hired is your ability to show interviewers how you will benefit them.

The issue here is distinguishing between features and benefits. For our purposes, a feature is a unique, inherent quality. A benefit is the pleasure or satisfaction that someone gets from a given feature.

Few people know how to use benefits to their advantage - in daily life or in a job interview. The benefit in a job interview is the answer to the question, "What will you do for me?" It's the answer you need to give to get the job you want.

Features and benefits are key concepts in sales. Selling is nothing more than telling with a purpose. And the act of finding a new job is selling. You are the product and the hiring manager is the customer. Whenever you're looking for a job, you need to sell yourself.

The Difference Between Features and Benefits
The difference between a feature and a benefit can seem subtle at first. A feature is simply a trait - a fact. In contrast, a benefit is something that aids or promotes well-being. A benefit can be thought of as the result of a feature - it's because of the feature that you're getting the benefit.

A feature of a yellow pencil is that it writes. A benefit might be: "The pencil allows me to express myself in writing." Similarly, an eraser lets you remove pencil writing. That's a feature. A benefit might be: "The pencil lets me get rid of my mistakes."

Study the following statements and consider whether each is a feature or a benefit:

1. This automobile has heated seats.
2. This copier makes 30 clean copies in one minute.
3. This is a full-service insurance company.
4. These potatoes were grown organically.
5. The hose on the vacuum cleaner stretches to twice its normal length.
6. This carpet comes with a 10-year warranty.
7. I have a master's degree in business administration.
8. I have been a paralegal for 10 years.

Each of those statements is a feature. They're simply facts - they don't tell the listener the benefits of the given feature.

Features without benefits don't mean very much to the interviewer. In an interview, you're always answering the question, "What will you do for me?" even though it isn't explicitly stated. This is the only thing interviewers care about. In fact, it's the only thing most people care about.

Translating Features Into Benefits
People don't automatically translate features into benefits when they hear them. We don't necessarily ask ourselves, "What will the feature do for me?" We're far more likely to think, "So what?"
An interviewer will be listening only for the benefits of hiring you. She cares only that she makes the right hiring decision. If you answer questions with features, but fail to relate the benefits, you aren't selling yourself to the interviewer. You must learn to highlight every answer by ending with an appropriate benefit.

It's important to note that just because someone is listening to you, even if they're listening intently, they aren't necessarily hearing or understanding you. You need to become your own translator - translating the features you bring (your skills and background) into meaningful benefits for the interviewer.

As practice, review the eight statements listed earlier and think about how to translate each feature into a benefit. Here's an example:

- **Feature:** This automobile has heated seats.
- **Benefit:** Heated seats warm you up fast on a cold winter day.

It's not easy. You might say the seats are comfortable, which sounds like a benefit. But simply throwing in an adjective like *comfortable* doesn't state a benefit. You need to show how the seats will help the customer.

Another difficulty is that a single feature can have more than one benefit. In fact, a single feature can offer many different benefits, and the benefits may change depending on the listener.

Let's go back to the list and see some possibilities.

- **Feature:** This copier makes 30 clean copies in one minute.
  - **Benefit:** Fast copying allows you to get more work done.

- **Feature:** This is a full-service insurance company.
  - **Benefit:** We can meet all your insurance needs.

- **Feature:** These potatoes were grown organically.
  - **Benefit:** Our organic suppliers protect you and your family from the danger of pesticides.

- **Feature:** The hose on the vacuum cleaner stretches to twice its normal length.
  - **Benefit:** You won't have to bend down as often to plug it in and unplug it as you move from room to room.

- **Feature:** This carpet comes with a 10-year warranty.
  - **Benefit:** Our replacement policy protects your investment from stains and fading.

- **Feature:** I have a master's degree in business administration.
  - **Benefit:** My education will allow me to implement the latest research in best business practices for your organization.

- **Feature:** I have been a paralegal for 10 years.
  - **Benefit:** My experience will allow me to step in and be productive for you on day one.

In the context of a job interview, the interviewer is your customer. Keep this in mind as you study the final two examples, which were specifically related to the job search. Our new graduate's feature is an MBA. The corresponding benefit is bringing current research into play at the interviewer's company. The paralegal has the feature of 10 years' experience while the benefit is the ability to be productive immediately.

**Make It a Habit**
To become truly efficient at using features and benefits, you need to make it a habit. And that won't happen by practicing it a few times.

Try to post the words, "What will you do for me?" where you can see them frequently. Make it your screen saver or put signs around your apartment or house. The signs are a visible reminder to practice so you can feel comfortable using these new skills. Conventional wisdom says that adopting a new habit or changing an old one takes 21 to 30 days. That means you should practice the skill of articulating features and benefits several times a day for three to four weeks before you can consider it a habit.
People who regularly practice the skill of presenting features and benefits until it becomes a habit are less nervous and more comfortable during an interview. You'll feel more confident and in control, making you even more appealing as a potential employee.

**Addressing Each Interviewer**

Beauty, as they say, is in the eye of the beholder. The same holds true for benefits. Any given feature may offer one benefit to one person and a completely different benefit to someone else. Understanding this concept is essential for effective communication - and for using your feature/benefit skills to their fullest potential during an interview.

The key is to find out what benefits are important to each person you're talking to - and in job hunting, that means each person who's interviewing you. Asking questions is important to discovering a person's wants and needs.

Job hunters who are unskilled in translating features into benefits often make the mistake of using the same benefits in every situation and with every interviewer. Remember, the feature stays the same, but it will mean different things to different people. It's up to you to determine the appropriate benefit.

Here's a simplified example. In this scenario, you're the owner of a men's clothing store and the only suits you have left are navy blue with vertical stripes. A man about 4 feet 10 inches tall walks into your store. What benefit would you offer him for buying the suit? "It will make you look taller," you could tell him, and he'll probably recognize that as a benefit.

Later, a man about 6 feet 10 inches tall comes in looking for a suit. If you give him the same benefit, chances are he won't buy the suit because he clearly doesn't need or want to look taller. In fact, how tall or short the suit makes him look may be completely irrelevant to him. The benefit for him may be, "The suit is stylish and makes you look successful."

How do you know what's important for a job interviewer? Here are some common ones to think about before an interview:

- The need to please the interviewer's boss.
- The need to make the right decision.
- The need for an orderly transition.
- The need to be perceived as successful.
- The need to feel important.
- The need to be recognized or remembered.
- The need for respect.
- The need to accomplish the task at hand in a timely manner.
- The need to feel comfortable with you.

**Listening and Asking Questions**

How can you learn what's important to each interviewer? How can you express your skills and experience as a benefit to the interviewer? By **listening**. By listening to the interviewer's words and paying attention to non-verbal communication, you can find out what's important.

You can also ask questions. In almost every interview, for example, the first question posed to a candidate sounds something like, "Tell me about yourself." If you try to answer the question directly, you'll probably ramble on and cover areas that may be of no interest to the interviewer. Chances are you'll be doing nothing more than rehashing your resume. If, as suggested in many job-hunting guides, you launch into a prepared statement about all your strengths, goals and achievements, you may not be addressing the needs of the interviewer. Remember, the interviewer is really asking, "What can you do for me?"

So instead of launching into a rambling answer or a memorized speech, try something like this, "Ms. Jones, I know your time is valuable. What areas would you like me to concentrate on?" It will be refreshing for the interviewer to break the normal pattern and concentrate on things that are important to her. Armed with her answer, you'll be able to talk about your experiences (which are features), ending with the benefits that you know are important to Ms. Jones.

Always be prepared to give specific examples to any benefits stated. It's likely that you'll be asked a few predictable questions, and you should be prepared to respond to them with outstanding answers.

Here's an example of how the approach comes together, when you're asked, "What are your strengths?"
"You mentioned that teamwork has been an important part of the company's success. I've learned that being a good listener [Feature: skill, good listener] is part of what makes me a good team player. I've seen that people at all levels have good ideas [Feature: experience]. I've also learned that a little appreciation goes a long way [Feature: skill, offering praise]. Offering frequent thank-yous can encourage a continual flow of ideas and suggestions [Benefit: encourages ongoing flow of ideas]."

**Conclusion**

That's the pattern for your responses to all questions in a job interview, if you want to sell yourself. Answer the question by listing the features you bring to the company, but then end by stressing what that adds up to - the benefit that you'll bring to that interviewer and the company.

- End -

*About the author: Oscar Adler has four decades' experience interviewing, hiring and training thousands of sales representatives, sales managers and support staff for Maidenform Brands.*

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