Answering Wild-Card Interview Questions

How would you respond if you were asked one of the following interview questions:

"If aliens landed here right now, what would you do?"
"What did you want to be when you were 8 years old?"
"What would your refrigerator say if it could talk?"

These types of odd questions are called "wild cards" because they seem to come out of nowhere. With the current economic climate allowing employers to be more picky, these types of questions are becoming more common. A stellar resume, impressive credentials, and strong interviewing skills are no longer enough.

While a rare interviewer may ask these questions simply to watch you squirm, many wild-card questions serve a purpose. Generally speaking, interviewers ask these questions to see how well you perform under pressure and think on your feet. They also might ask wild cards to break out of the routine of a typical interview in order to get a glimpse of your genuine personality.

Here are some real questions as reported by job seekers, with some insight into what interviewers may be looking for -- and how to deliver:

"If there was a fire in your house, what two things would you save?"

*What's the point?* The interviewer is trying to determine how well your ideals and principles match the company's values.

*Approach:* Find an honest answer that aligns you with the values of the company with which you are interviewing.

*Possible response:* If you're applying for a job as a technical project manager, for example, you might say: "My computer and my family photo album." This shows your obvious technical side but also demonstrates that you prioritize relationships. This could help distinguish you from your fellow techie competitors.

"If you were a cereal, what would you be?"

*What's the point?* The interviewer is trying to gain some insight into your work personality to see what kind of worker you will be. If you are unsure of what your work personality is, you can take a career interest test to find out.

*Approach:* Try to tie your answer back to the job requirements.
Possible response: If you were interviewing for a nursing assistant, position, you could say: "Cheerios. Because I'm reliable, consistent, and good for you!" -- all positive qualities for someone in the health-care industry.

"If you were writing an autobiography, what would its title be?"

What's the point? This question gives the interviewer a peek into your self-perception as well as a read on how creative you are.

Approach: Emphasize your main selling points. If you can't come up with something original on the fly, perhaps there is a song or movie title that captures your essence. You don't need to invent something on the spot as long as you can provide a good explanation for the title you choose.

Possible response: If you were applying for a job as a social worker, you could say "I Will Survive," explaining that the hardships you personally experienced made you a stronger person, qualified to help others to work through their own issues.

It's impossible to rehearse the best responses to wild-card interview questions, since, by definition, they are unpredictable. But you can prep. Even if you don't get asked the specific questions you've practiced for, you'll still have a better handle on wild cards in general. If you answer honestly and justify your response, you'll likely impress your interviewers and be one step closer to landing your dream job.

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