Interviewing, like almost everything humans undertake, is a skill that improves with practice. Unfortunately for busy neurologists, interview “practice” is more likely to happen during the first round of meetings with future employers, and not in a leisurely strategy session with a career counselor. There just isn’t enough time sometimes to prepare as much as you’d like.

Luckily, there are short-cuts you can take on the way to delivering a good interview performance. One of the best is to develop a core set of messages—or as politicians say, talking points—to highlight your relevant strengths for the job. And, since you’re likely to interview for similar jobs during any particular stage of your career, the good news is that you only need to do this once per “campaign.” That is, if you’re interviewing this week with a hospital in Baton Rouge and next week with a clinic in Los Angeles, you’ll likely be performing similar duties. So key messages you prepare at the beginning of your search should serve you well for all your interviews.

**BASE CORE MESSAGES ON YOUR STRENGTHS**

The secret to developing a good set of core messages is to base them on your strengths. After all, your next employers aren’t hoping to hire you for your weak points. They want to leverage what you do well. Your task is to identify what that is, then find a way to present that information throughout the interview.

To be effective, core messages should be relatively few in number—perhaps three or four in all. They need to be general enough to accommodate a variety of questions, but specific enough to have impact. And, most importantly, they should illustrate something that you’re good at and can talk about easily. Here are some examples of core messages that are useful, and some that don’t quite make the grade.

**Weak:** “I’m good with patients.”

**Problem:** This isn’t specific enough, so it loses impact.

**Better:** “I build good rapport with patients and their families. I’ve noticed that patients tend to give me more information than they give other doctors and that lets me create a more targeted treatment plan for them.”

**Weak:** “I’m a hard worker.”

**Problem:** Because you’re a doctor, interviewers will assume this about you.

**Better:** “I’m very committed to my work, and especially to the research aspect. It’s not unusual for me to put in extra hours going over the data or reading other researchers’ results. In a number of circumstances, the extra work I’ve put in has given me a stronger background and let me contribute more to the project.”

**Weak:** “I was Chief Resident.”

**Problem:** This states a fact that is already obvious from the CV. Also, it’s a job title, not a strength.

**Better:** “I’m very comfortable training and leading others, and handling administrative processes. These are things I learned to do while I was Chief Resident and they correspond well to natural strengths I have for being organized and working on teams.”

**Weak:** “I have dual training in anesthesia and headache.”

**Problem:** This statement doesn’t highlight how your training matters to the employer.

**Better:** “Because I have dual training from my headache and anesthesia fellowships, I can bring a lot of flexibility to the practice I join. I plan to keep up both specialties and that should help with referrals and business building.”

As you can see, the best messages go beyond simply stating a fact. They are platforms from which you can launch answers to any number of interview questions. For example, take the universal query, “Why don’t you tell us a little about yourself?” Instead of reciting the contents of your CV in reverse order (“I went to high school in Brooklyn and always wanted to be a doctor…”), you might say, “Well, you have my CV so you already know my background. But I’d like to tell you more about my headache and anesthesia fellowships and why I went that direction.”

Here’s another one. When asked your plans for the next five years, don’t just say “I’d like to work on projects such as…” but instead, start with “I’ve always been a hard worker, and that means that I tend to be motivated...
by challenges. In five years, I’d like to be working with projects that…”

With some creativity, there’s almost no question that can’t be answered from one of your core messages. And, despite what you might expect to be true, the effect isn’t one of relentless repetition. Rather, because you are changing up the way you present your strengths in connection to each question, the interviewer will hear a varied but cohesive message, delivered with confidence. Better, you will be more relaxed and attentive to the nuances of the question, since you won’t be straining to hold a dozen unrelated, memorized answers in your head.

IDENTIFYING INTERVIEW-WORTHY STRENGTHS

If you want to give this method a try, you’ll need to identify strengths that fit the criteria noted above—general enough to be applicable to multiple questions, but specific enough to have meaning and impact. Here are some tips to help you identify strengths that are interview-worthy.

STRENGTHS BASED ON YOUR PERSONALITY

Think about your personality traits and what others have told you. If you consistently hear that you are compassionate or well-organized or have high standards, chances are this is something that is more true of you than it is of most others.

Once you have identified a handful of traits, triage them according to which might be most useful in your next work. For example, if you’re planning to work in a fast-paced clinic, your natural tendency toward being efficient might make a better interview message than your equally strong creative nature.

STRENGTHS BASED ON YOUR TRAINING

Remember that the training itself isn’t the strength. It’s what you can do with that training that sets you apart from other candidates with the same credential. And don’t overly rely on having been first in your class or some other ranking—that won’t be as useful in the interview as specific cases you handled or techniques you learned.

STRENGTHS BASED ON YOUR PREVIOUS EXPERIENCES AND KNOWLEDGE

Whether it was earlier work, volunteer engagements, or committee assignments, you might have an impressive strength tucked away in your background. Perhaps you’re multilingual/multicultural, giving you an edge in working with colleagues and patients from other countries. Or maybe you’ve served on administrative committees and bring an understanding of the business aspects of running a practice.

Once you’ve identified three or four strengths, all that’s left is to organize your thinking so you’ll be ready with your answers on a moment’s notice. One way to do this is to think about circumstances, stories, and situations in which you demonstrated one or more of these strengths. Write notes so that you can bring the details to mind and correlate them to questions you expect to encounter. If you have time to practice answering sample questions, all the better. But even if you’re not able to squeeze in the practice session, you’ll be in strong position if you review your three or four strengths ahead of each interview, and your notes about when you used them.

Once you’ve tried an interview with this process, you’ll have trouble remembering why you ever did it any other way. It’s much more relaxing to come to the meeting with your messages in mind, and more rewarding to talk about things you do well. •