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## Ways to Get Into Business School

by Vicki Salemi

Admission to top MBA programs remains extremely competitive. In some cases, acceptance rates are as low as 10 percent. Leading candidates with the highest GMAT scores and GPAs, seeking a spot at the top schools, are often baffled by rejection. Here's how you can avoid the rejection pile.

**1. Know what you want.** "Have a clear understanding of your goals," notes Daphne Atkinson, vice president of industry relations for Graduate Management Admission Council, a not-for-profit education association composed of the world's leading business schools. Sounds simple, but many find clearly defining a desired outcome of their MBA experience (aside from more money) challenging. In order to truly succeed, however, focusing on programs that will help you achieve the results you want will put you closer to your dream.

"You're likely to be most compatible with programs aligned with your interests and ambitions," Atkinson adds. This exercise in self-discovery will not only clearly identify what you want, it will also clarify what you don't want.

**2. Ace the interview.** You've been on many job interviews, haven't you? What you've learned there is key to grad school admission as well, advises Evelyn Tate, director of admissions at Northeastern University's College of Business Administration (Boston, MA). Treat the campus interview like a job interview by preparing comments about difficult situations and how you handled them, she says.

"The questions may range from the typical 'tell me why you want to enroll in our MBA program' to those focusing on your behavior at work," Tate notes. And similar to a job interview, be sure to ask questions when you're prompted. "Use this opportunity to your advantage; ask thoughtful questions to learn more about the program," she advises. >>

**3. Write a stellar personal statement.** While the campus interview is your opportunity to shine in person, a scintillating essay will help your application stand out from the pile. The key to make a lasting impression in print? Kelly Tanabe, author of "Accepted! 50 Successful Business School Admission Essays" (SuperCollege, 2003), recommends highlighting personal accomplishments.

"Quantify what you have done and put the meaning of it into context," she explains. "If you increased sales by 50 percent, explain how you accomplished this goal and describe the magnitude of the success." Plus, it's not uncommon to write about non-work-related accomplishments, such as running a marathon. To craft an eloquent essay, Tanabe stresses the significance of approaching a common topic in a unique way. "Don't just describe your accomplishment; define its meaning in your life on an intellectual level."

**4. Submit an impeccable application.** If there were ever an important time to use spellcheck, it's now. Ensure your application is void of typos, submit it prior to the deadline, and consider it another way to effectively present yourself.

"Submit a flawless application and consider this your interview," notes Paula O'Callaghan, author of the foreword to "The Complete Idiot's Guide to Getting Your MBA Online" (Alpha/Penguin, 2005). "Present yourself on paper as professionally as you would in the in-person setting," she adds.

**5. Network, network, network.** After all, until it becomes all about what you know (learned from grad school, of course), it's who you know.

"Get to know and impress the tenured faculty members of your business school," advises Kelly Perdew, winner of "The Apprentice: Season 2" and author of the upcoming book "Take Command: 10 Leadership Principles Learned in the U.S. Military" (Regnery Publishing, 2006). Here's how he did it: "While an undergraduate, I introduced myself to the faculty staff at the business school, telling them what I wanted to get from business school and why I was a compelling candidate. I made sure they knew who I was before they even received my application," Perdew explains. He's convinced the statement factored into his being granted entry.

After earning his bachelor of science degree from the highly competitive United States Military Academy (West Point, NY), Perdew continued his education and earned his MBA from UCLA Anderson School (Los Angeles, CA).

**6. Work those recommendations.** In other words, make them work for you. When selecting who should write your recommendation, remember he or she should be both your advocate and spokesperson. According to Larry Sochrin, senior business admissions consultant at Kaplan Test Prep and Admissions, a leading provider of lifelong education, you need to ensure they have experience in writing recommendations and feel comfortable bragging about you.

Recommenders who ask applicants to write the recommendations for them are usually doing more harm than good, Sochrin explains. "Admissions staffs are experienced enough to see whether the recommendation was written by an experienced manager or by an applicant."

**7. Do your homework; take prerequisites.** Sochrin, who earned his MBA at The Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania (Philadelphia, PA), indicates some applicants with high GPAs and GMAT scores are hurt by what they didn't do well. If they are missing certain undergraduate courses such as differential and integral calculus, statistics, accounting, or economics, it sticks out.

"Research areas that are important to each school, and then consider taking a class or two if you haven't already," he suggests. If you haven't taken the critical courses that are often prerequisites to MBA programs, he advises mentioning in your application that you plan to enroll. "This will show initiative and strengthen your application."

**8. Demonstrate relevant work experience.** Perdew advises that it's all about illuminating your strengths. After all, it worked to impress "The Donald." "Gaining experience in the area where you want to concentrate is crucial whether it's internships, job shadowing, or part-time work," Perdew says. Relevant experience is fundamental to a successful application regardless of level. "It demonstrates your commitment and dedication to your field, and shows you are prepared to work for what you want."

**9. Have a substantial résumé.** Along with relevant work experience is the length of that experience. Some schools accept applicants with several years of work experience, so if students are lacking in this area, their applications may quickly gravitate to the bottom of the pile. Sochrin explains, "Top schools have told some of my clients that they would probably get in if they reapplied with an additional year or two of experience, and they did!"

**10. Be realistic.** Harvard can't accept everyone. Sochrin reminds applicants to be practical when selecting schools. "Most of my clients insist on applying only to the top few schools. They all want to apply to Harvard. With more than 8,000 applicants for a limited number of openings, everyone will not be accepted." In other words, don't apply only to reach schools; rather, apply to schools within your reach. His advice? Apply to several schools, about six or more if you can afford it.

**The experts agree:** When it comes to increasing your likelihood of acceptance, it may just be a matter of broadening the scope of your search.

After retiring as an industrial engineer, Charles Winarchick looked forward to his new role teaching at a community college in Dayton, OH. The position required he earn a master's degree in a related field within five years of being hired, however, with a work schedule that changed every 11 weeks, he needed a flexible learning arrangement; going from teaching class to attending class just wasn't going to work for him. Then he discovered the online MBA program in project management at Jones International University (Centennial, CO).

"The advantage of using an online course is the adaptability of the schedule to changing conditions. It actually makes it possible to work, go to school, and have a life." In fact, now close to completion, Charles is considering enrolling in an online Ph.D. program. ■