

Successfully Sell Yourself With Your Cover Letter

Four Tips

It is often said that finding a job is a job in itself. But what you may not realize is that it's a sales job. To win over hiring managers and convince them to invest in the product you're pitching — you — it's important to take full advantage of every marketing tool at your disposal.

In recent years, however, some job seekers have hurt their causes by overlooking a key self-promotional document: the cover letter. The majority of applications today are submitted through e-mail. As a result, many candidates forgo the cover letter, offering little more than "Please see attached résumé" instead.

That's a huge mistake.

While your résumé provides an overview of your professional background, a well-written cover letter allows you to explain in depth the unique skills and qualifications that make you ideal for the role. Following are tips on successfully selling yourself to prospective employers using your cover letter:

1. Address for Success

Standout salespeople know the names of all their customers. Whenever possible, get personal by addressing your cover letter to a particular individual instead of writing a generic salutation such as "To Whom It May Concern" or "Dear Employer." If a job posting doesn't mention whom to contact, be proactive and call the company to ask for the hiring manager's name and title, the correct spelling of the name, and the person's gender if it's not obvious. By doing so, your letter will land in the right hands, and you'll score points for demonstrating motivation and resourcefulness. At the very least, avoid using the following salutations from two actual cover letters: "Dear Sir or Mom" and "To Concern Whom It May Concern."

2. Sell Customized Content

Employers have unique needs and corporate cultures, which is why it's crucial that you target your sales pitch to each company you contact. Link your skills, work history and biggest professional accomplishments to the requirements of the open position. Base your approach on the information revealed in the job posting.

For example, design candidates might emphasize their stellar interpersonal and critical-thinking abilities to an employer looking for "a positive-minded, team-oriented strategist," but play up their mastery of design software for a company seeking a "tech-savvy professional with advanced Adobe Photoshop skills and motion graphics expertise."

3. Keep It Short and Sweet

Most TV advertisers have a mere 30 seconds to get their messages across to potential customers. Keep this in mind when crafting your cover letter. Hiring managers with piles of

applications on their desks do not have time to wade through verbose and unfocused documents. The best cover letters are comprehensive, clear, concise and compelling.

Write an attention-grabbing introduction, succinctly highlight your top attributes, explain why the job interests you, request an interview and then thank the employer for his or her time. Don't waste valuable space with clichéd buzzwords or long-winded anecdotes. Also, while it's acceptable to inject some personality, keep the spotlight on your career instead of meandering off track with irrelevant details about your personal life. For instance, one real-life job seeker offered this odd statement: "By the time I graduated college, I had been sold at a charity auction, welcomed a niece into the world — and been hit by a train." Another included this tidbit in her cover letter: "I can't work anywhere that isn't surrounded by fast food."

4. Offer Truth in Advertising

Sales, marketing and advertising professionals can get themselves in hot water by claiming a product or service offers more than it actually does. Likewise, the worst faux pas a job seeker can make is to lie on a résumé or cover letter. While you want to make a positive first impression and land an interview, don't stretch the truth in order to do so. For example, one applicant we came across claimed to be Time magazine's 2006 Person of the Year. He forgot to mention that when Time named "You" the honoree, the publication meant everyone on Earth. Remember that even white lies and "minor" misrepresentations can come back to haunt you, even after you've landed the position.

Finally, if you meet all of the requirements and feel that you're the perfect candidate for a job, understand that there's a fine line between coming across as confident and cocky. Therefore, steer clear of off-putting self-praise in your cover letter. Instead of boastfully writing about being the "best," use specific examples of how you positively contribute to your current employer's bottom line as a means of selling yourself. After all, the most persuasive salespeople can always back up their well-crafted pitches with quantifiable facts.