

The Outstanding Cover Letter

Most people know how important it is to make a good first impression during a job interview.

That's why they dress nicely, arrive on time, and give the interviewer a big smile and a confident handshake.

But many people who respond to job ads—and who may be well qualified—never reach the interview stage and wonder why. It may be that they blew it with their cover letter, the one-page letter sent with the resume. (Or they really blew it by not including one at all.)

That letter is your real first impression on the employer, your chance to stand out from the crowd. How can you make sure that your cover letter gets you in the door?

Appearances Matter

Your cover letter must have the crisp look of a business communication from an applicant who deserves to be taken seriously.

- It should be on good quality bond paper, 8 1/2" x 11" in size.
- It should be white or off-white, never a color or lined.
- Laser printing or letter quality inkjet/bubble jet are standard these days. Or use a high quality typewriter.
- Letterhead stationery is impressive but expensive and really isn't necessary. Follow a standard business letter format, and you won't go wrong.
- Your cover letter should always look like an original, not a reproduction.

The One Page Rule

One page is usually enough if your paragraphs are single-spaced and know how to write an effective cover letter. If you must spill over to a second page, put a

page number at the top, either in the center or the upper right corner. If the page number is in the upper right corner, use the upper left corner for what's called the "running head": brief identifying information, like your last name. That way, if page two gets separated from the rest of the package, they'll know where it belongs.

A Sales Tool

The secret to writing a great cover letter is understanding that it isn't a stand-alone document or a dry form letter. It's a sales tool that must work in partnership with your resume to grab attention and score points in your favor. A good way to begin is to say...

- Why you're writing. Tell them what job you're applying for and where you saw the job announcement.
- Then, in a single sentence, state your general suitability for the job. If they're looking for a legal secretary, you might say: "As you'll see from my resume, I have strong experience as a legal secretary with several major law firms."
- Next—and this is the best support your cover letter can give your resume—you must highlight strengths and assets in your background that relate to their needs.

Think for a moment about the person who screens letters and resumes all day. A hundred or more may come in the mail day after day in response to an ad. Is he or she going to go over every page with a fine-toothed comb? More likely, that person will scan the page, looking for key words and phrases.

If the ad says: "Knowledge of Pagemaker essential," or "Retail sales experience required," they'll scan your letter and resume for the words "PageMaker" or "retail" and "sales."

If you have Pagemaker or retail sales experience, don't trust them to find it in your resume. You have to flag that experience in the heart of your cover letter—the strengths and assets section. Then describe your sales or Pagemaker experience in your resume in detail.

Punch Up Your Strengths

One way to introduce the strengths and assets section of your letter is to say, "Some of my relevant professional strengths are:". Then, list four to six of your special assets. Make them stand out on the page with asterisks or bullets and by indenting.

If they want someone who knows Pagemaker...

• Expert at Pagemaker with six years desktop publishing experience."

If they want a person with retail sales experience...

• Three years as a sales associate with major retail clothing chain."

Okay, you've spotlighted strengths that relate directly to qualifications they ask for in their ad. Is there more you can do in your cover letter to stand out from the pack?

The Insider's Edge

Employment ads cost money. It would be too expensive to list every quality they want in a candidate. Ask yourself: Does this employer have unspoken needs that I can fill? (Here's where some insider knowledge of the company will pay off, either from your own experience or the advice of someone who's familiar with that particular field.)

Let's suppose that companies in their industry are desperate for people who are super-reliable about meeting deadlines, because missed deadlines are very costly and antagonize customers.

After responding to the requirements from the ad, you can say...

• Demonstrated ability to complete assignments on time or ahead of schedule."

The key word is "demonstrated." Anyone can say, "Oh sure, I always meet deadlines." Not everyone can boast, "I always meet deadlines, and I can prove it." But you better have the references to back up that claim.

The list of strengths and assets in your cover letter highlights qualities you have that they want and need. It

makes them eager to read your resume, contact your references, and meet you face to face. It makes them think hopefully, "We may have found the person we're looking for."

Suggest An Action

Think of your cover letter and resume as a direct mail sales piece, the kind of thing you get in the mail all the time. What are you selling? You! What response do you want? That's easy. A phone call or letter asking you to come in for an interview.

Direct response sales literature usually closes by asking or telling the reader to act. You can't be as aggressive as CALL NOW!, so you say, "I look forward to hearing from you about a personal interview." Then close with your salutation.

You have a good basic logic for your one-page cover letter: Why you're writing...your general suitability for the job...your list of strengths and assets... a request for action on their part...a courteous salutation.

Now for something a little more subtle, but very important to any first impression, whether in person, over the phone, or in writing.

Watch Your Tone

Tone can be tricky. The days are long gone when all business letters were formal, impersonal, and stiff. But you don't want to sound too breezy or casual, either. You and the reader are not old buddies, and an application for a job is a serious matter. Confidence is good, sounding smart alecky isn't.

"But wait," you protest, "I have a great sense of humor. Won't they be more inclined to like me if I can make them smile or laugh?"

Careful! The person who screens letters and resumes all day may find your humor a relief from a boring task. But is that the same person who's going to decide whether to call you for an interview? Whether to hire you? Probably not. That will be a manager, decision maker, or personnel executive, and people on that level

in business tend to be a bit conservative. They may find your humor "frivolous."

Once you've got the job and have proved yourself, your boss and co-workers may love your Seinfeldian wit or Eddie Murphy brashness. For a first impression, be happy if they think you're qualified, intelligent, and professional.

What's an ideal tone for your cover letter? Enthusiasm! If you're genuinely excited by the prospect of working for them and can communicate that, they'll be more inclined to call you in for an interview.

Before You Lick The Flap

- Print out the letter, hold it at arm's length, and look at it as a whole. Does it look nicely laid-out on the page?
- Do you make any claims in your letter (or resume) you won't be able to back up later?
- Is your letter easy to read? Keep your paragraphs short. Try to use simple language. Which is easier to understand "Facilitated the expedition of managerial assignments" or "Made it easier for managers to do their jobs."
- Double-check for typos, misspellings, and grammatical errors. Use your Spell Checker. Mistakes give an impression of carelessness or lack of education.
- Finally, have someone look over your letter before you send it out. Preferably, someone with more business experience than you.

Does this seem like a lot of work for a one-page letter? Just remember that your cover letter is the first impression you make on a potential employer, and you never get a second chance to make a good first impression. ▲

Burt Wetanson is a L.A.-based writer who has worked on programs in executive job search, outplacement, vocational training, and youth business education. He can be reached at (213) 487-6820.