

COVER LETTERS: A CRITICAL PIECE OF THE CAREER ADVANCEMENT PUZZLE

COVER LETTERS are a key component of your job search arsenal and a vital companion to your résumé. An adequate cover letter complements your résumé and encourages the hiring authority to read what you have presented. A good cover letter reveals your understanding of the employer's needs and a solid sense of your professionalism and style. A great cover letter does all of the above and more, elevating you "head and shoulders above your competition." Great cover letters announce that you have the experience, intelligence, and soft skills to be the answer to an employer's staffing problem, i.e. "*just what the 'doctor' ordered*" "... *an answer to our prayers.*" On the other hand, run-of-the-mill cover letters announce, unfortunately, that this is just "*another canned letter*" from an applicant going through the motions of looking for work or "another uninspired applicant" who hasn't once indicated her interest in the hiring company's needs.

There is no doubt that a great cover letter can make the difference in whether you get noticed or passed over. A great cover letter can be a powerful marketing tool that does all of the following:

- ❖ Positions you head-and-shoulders above the competition.
- ❖ Sells your qualifications and your successes.
- ❖ Demonstrates your knowledge, experience, and expertise.
- ❖ Creates excitement, enthusiasm, and action Leading to the all-important interview.

I am frequently asked, "*Which is more important, the résumé or the cover letter?*" Conventional wisdom says, and I was taught many years ago that, you have only two chances to sell yourself into an interview: 1) the résumé and 2) the cover letter. All too often, the cover letter is approached as a *pro forma* throwaway: *I am responding to your ad ...enclosed is my résumé ... and G-d, I hope you call me in for an interview!* What a waste of paper and a missed opportunity to differentiate yourself from the field of competition (... *the rest of the mindless herd*). On the other hand, utilizing both (résumé and cover letter) to maximum advantage is like a prizefighter having the ability to deliver a devastating knockout *one-two punch*. Sometimes when asked the above stated question, I respond, "If you were running to catch a train, which is more important, your right leg or your left? Well, obviously you need both to get the job done efficiently."

Cover letters are crucial to your job search success. They are a valuable indicator of your intelligence, business savvy, and confidence, as well as your level of professionalism, experience and skills. During my 20+ years of coaching candidates in the job search process, I have discovered that people's attitudes toward cover letters are divided into two groups: those whose distaste of writing letters is like their fear of having a tooth extracted, and those who think that it's a snap — "don't you just slap a few paragraphs together and say you want the position?" ... Or.... "*Can't you just give me a basic format; ... you know, just so I can address my résumé to the manager?*" This indicates his need for a crash course in effective business etiquette and marketing, along with a reality check on how very competitive it is in today's job market. A poorly written cover letter can literally knock you out of the running for career opportunities—positions you are qualified for—and leave you wondering *why your job search is taking so long*.

The major thrust of your cover letter should be delivering value.
Value means that you have something to offer; something of worth.

To help focus on value, try answering the following questions:

- ☑ What problems does this employer have that need solving?
- ☑ How can I prove that I can be of assistance to this employer?
- ☑ Am I demonstrating to the employer that I have experience dealing with the kinds of problems facing her company?
- ☑ Have I clearly communicated that I have met with success in solving the same kinds of problems that his company faces?
- ☑ EVEN BETTER ... Have I conclusively proven that I have a strong track record in PREVENTING the types of problems that traditionally plague this employer? Is my message relevant to the needs of this particular employer? Am I putting the employer's needs above my needs?

Hopefully, you noticed a pattern running through these questions. It has to do with the employer's perspective. Are you writing to the employer's needs or to your own? One method to gauge where the emphasis lies is to do some simple math. Count up the number of "I's", "my's", and "me's" in your letter. Using too many of them give a *self-centered* feeling, pointing to a *me-focus* rather than an **employer-orientation**.

The Difference Between SELLING and TELLING

Keep the following in mind: Your potential boss doesn't really care what you do from nine 'till five. S/he cares about what you can do for him/her! In the cover letter you will need to a) emphasize the "benefits" of having you as an employee and, b) reinforce your value.

In today's job market, rarely does the job offer go to the best-qualified candidate.

However, if we can rule out politics and nepotism, etc., ...in the best of all worlds,

the job goes to the person the employer THINKS is the best-qualified candidate.

And this is a direct reflection on how we market ourselves into the position. There is a HUGE difference between **value** and **perceived value**! Perceived value is extremely important. If you deliver the goods in your résumé and cover letter package, your future employer will have a sharp image of you performing in her realm of concern, solving the problems that her company faces. Here is a wonderful opportunity to **take control of the employer's first impression of you as a professional** and then **elevate the level** at which s/he perceives your value to be.

"Selling" works much better than "telling." It's a principle of human nature and good relationships. I realize that it's difficult to sell in a letter. By nature, it's a one-way conversation because the recipient has no opportunity to answer you directly or interject thoughts or questions. You can, however, dramatically improve the effectiveness and results by painting a vivid picture, instead of making demands or simply stating the obvious facts. {I am responding to your ad for a qualified _____. Enclosed is my résumé for your examination.} Remember, the more visual you are on paper, the easier it will be for the hiring authority to see you doing "a top flight job" in your new position.

Your résumé is critically important! But please realize that the résumé has its limitations. Résumé sentences are, by nature, quite terse. They are functioning much like headlines or sound bites ... especially the bullet point statements. Conversely, the paragraph structure of the cover letter gives your statements the flexibility to *breathe*. You can communicate more of your personality and work style. The cover letter allows you the opportunity to say things like: "It has always been my feeling that" "My research has shown that ... " "I believe in" : "My experience has shown..." or "My philosophy of teaching is" Employers hire people, not automatons. They want to know what kind of person you are. What kind of a professional you are. What makes you tick? They want to know that your personality and work style, your soft skills, will be a good fit with the corporate culture, ... that you are a team player. Allow them to "*look under the hood*" and take a peek inside. Make sure that you integrate aspects of your personality, character, or philosophy. The type of position you are targeting will certainly help formulate what you reveal — in some cases, it just won't be appropriate; in other cases, it will be critically important.

An effective cover letter should contain the following three segments:

- 1) “**DANGLE THE BAIT**”— to capture the reader’s attention and interest. Make sure that you use an introduction that is fresh, interesting and relevant. Here you have an excellent opportunity to differentiate yourself from your competition, many of whom will begin their letters with something like: “Please accept this résumé as application for the position of _____ as advertised in the Sunday Times.”
- 2) “**PROVE IT!**”— and strengthen or support, not re-hash, information from your résumé. You might offer a skills summary with specific accomplishments that are either **quantified** or **qualified**. “The proof is in the pudding.”
- 3) **THE CLOSE** — a “call to action” ... a confident finish that suggests a meeting or invites the reader to take action. It should be confident, but not pushy, striking a balance between being assertive and considerately respectful.

There are four basic variations of your cover letter. Depending on your job search strategy you might need two or more cover letter varieties. For a moment, let’s pause and examine a helpful analogy: the turkey sandwich. Now, you can serve it on rye, whole wheat, or white bread ... or even a club roll and your condiment choice offers additional variety. But the “meat” of the sandwich stays the same. Your basic sales message (the meat) won’t change much. However your introduction and closing (top and bottom slices of bread) will need to be custom tailored for the situation. In my analogy, the turkey sandwich is still a turkey sandwich; no matter what kind of bread or roll it is served on.

The most common use of a cover letter is for **responding to a classified or “help wanted” ad** or announced/posted job vacancy. In your introductory paragraph (*one of the outside parts of the sandwich*) you will need to reference the position that you are applying for and where you learned of the company’s need for your qualifications. This answers the employer’s implicit question “*Why are you contacting me?*” The closing paragraph should reference how your skills mix is a great match for their stated needs, which could be demonstrated most effectively during a personal interview.

The “*meat*” of the sandwich (that is any version of your cover letter), of course, must demonstrate how your skills, expertise, and experience are an ideal match for the prospective employer’s needs. This is the part where you persuasively demonstrate that you are “*just what the doctor ordered.*” Keep in mind that any organization that is in a hiring mode has a problem. It could be a ‘good problem’ i.e., business is booming and we don’t have enough people to keep up with it; the firm just landed a new contract and needs to staff a new department, etc. Or, it could be a ‘bad’ problem such as: the last person in this position resigned, or was terminated, or was promoted ... and we need to quickly fill that position. This is the section where you have the opportunity to ‘pre-convince’ the hiring authority that *you can either solve or prevent their problem* and therefore *merit an invitation for a personal interview*.

Before you can request an interview, (*keep in mind that this involves an investment of time on the part of the hiring authority*) you have to accomplish several critical objectives in your cover letters. These include the following:

- ❖ Introducing yourself and **clearly defining** “who” you are as a professional
- ❖ **Highlighting** your most important qualifications, experiences, skills, and achievements. Oh ... and don’t forget important credentials.
- ❖ **Identifying** your **potential value** to the organization.
- ❖ Capturing the reader’s interest in you, your résumé, and your availability.
- ❖ Motivating the reader to call and invite you to come for an interview.

*To do less relegates your cover letter to being a meager **throw-away** that merely states that you have sent in your résumé .*

TO OPTIMIZE THE IMPACT OF YOUR COVER LETTERS AND THE RESPONSE THAT THEY GENERATE, YOU MUST BE WILLING TO INVEST THE TIME AND ENERGY TO CREATE CUSTOMIZED LETTERS THAT SELL YOU FOR A SPECIFIC OPPORTUNITY.

Anything less will reduce your chances of capturing your reader’s attention and being offered the opportunity for an interview.

Here's a reality of the current employment market: One-third of the individuals to whom you write a letter will *never* read it; one-third will *always* read it; and one-third *might* read it if the résumé is interesting and catches their immediate attention. When you write your letters, remember that you are always writing to the latter two categories of hiring authorities – the ones who are most likely to read your letter and take action (*such as granting you the opportunity for a personal interview*). Because you don't know which category the reader will fall into, **all of your career marketing letters must be purposefully strategized, powerfully written, and especially well presented.**

Another COVER LETTER variety is used when **contacting companies that haven't actually (or yet) announced a job vacancy** so you can't say that you are applying for the (*fill in your next job title*) position as advertised in the Sunday paper. This type of letter is useful in two somewhat different situations. The first is when you have determined that a particular company is one that "*you've always wanted to work for*" and you are announcing your availability. The second is when you are doing a larger mailing to a targeted list companies who *might* benefit from someone with your particular qualifications. This variation is optimal when you are planning on relocating to a different geographic area and wish to connect with the relevant players for your field. Your opening and closing should be adapted appropriately.

Writing to professionals in the employment industry, **Recruiters, Headhunters, Executive Search Firms, and Employment Agencies** require a different approach. You have to bear in mind that these professionals, as nice and friendly as they may be, are not out there helping you find a job. They are never out there "*beating the brush*" in search of a job for you. Their allegiance is to their corporate client, the organization that *placed a job order with them*. If your background and qualifications look like a good match for the stated requirements, then the recruiter will be only too happy to present you as a candidate and receive a handsome commission should the client hire you. So your letter must reflect your ability to meet the recruiter's needs... which is to satisfy the corporate client. The closer your qualifications match the hiring company's requirements, the "easier a sell" you will be for the recruiter and s/ he will be more inclined to present you as a candidate or finalist. Ask yourself if your résumé and cover letter package are truly presenting you as "just what the doctor ordered." Remember that you are not asking the recruiter for a job (unless you want to work in a recruiting firm). Make sure that your focus is on how your expertise and experience may be a match for the needs of one of the recruiter's clients.

The fourth derivative is appropriate when you are **using a contact name as a "bridge" into an organization**. This type of letter has the advantage of doing some "name dropping" and can indicate why this person, known to the organization, feels that you are an excellent match for the company and has therefore recommended that you contact them.

5 CRITICAL OBJECTIVES TO ACHIEVE WHEN WRITING YOUR COVER LETTER

1. Introduce yourself and clearly define "who you are" and how you want to be perceived, as a professional, at this point in your career - as a welder, teacher, sales manager, aerospace engineer, accountant, business manager, purchasing agent, security guard, historian, executive assistant, CIO, or CEO.
2. Showcase your most notable qualifications - experience, educational credentials, accomplishments, career successes, honors, awards and credentials.
3. Accurately Identify the value you bring to that organization - what you can and **will** do for them.
4. Capture the reader's interest in you, your résumé and your availability.
5. Motivate the reader to call and offer you the opportunity for a person-to-person or telephone interview.

And, you want to accomplish this using the least words possible! This is even truer when writing an online cover letter. Quick and to the point works best.

One of the strategies I find to be extremely effective to use in cover letters, is to pull out the top 4 or 5 achievements and showcase them in bullet form within the letter. It serves as an excellent focus point for readers' eyes and draws their attention immediately to your strengths. This strategy also eliminates the need for many instances of the first person pronoun, *I* {over use of *me* and *I* makes your letter sound "self-centered" where your optimal strategy is to be **employer oriented**}. Here's a brief excerpt from what would naturally be a longer cover letter:

... Recognized as a top-performer and dedicated professional, my record of achievements include:

- Generating a 47% increase in new business during tenure as National Sales Manager
- Boosting client media coverage 50% and developing strategic partnerships with previously unsecured media contacts

There are many ways to say things but, as you can see, some words have a much more forceful impact on readers than others. In cover letters, e-résumés, and traditional résumés, you can change the reader's perception in a split second by substituting various words or phrases for more traditional (and *boringly outdated*) terminology. **You need to 'paint a vitally-visual picture of you performing at your optimal best!'** Remember: There is a huge difference between **actual value** and **perceived value**. The key objective here is to prevent the reader getting a feeling of "So What or ...Who Cares?" (see the Non-Aggressive Terminology examples) and ensure that s/he is presented with a statement of your value ... delivered with **Full Impact!** See the outline below:

KEY:

NAT = Non-Aggressive Terminology

AGT = **Aggressive** Terminology

NAT: Set up entire department from scratch.

AGT: Configured department from inception through successful operation.

NAT: Worked closely with department heads.

AGT: Orchestrated highly effective relationships with department heads.

NAT: Helped produce \$3 million in sales.

AGT: Instrumental in generating \$3 million in sales.

NAT: Helped new employees.

AGT: Effectively trained new employees to rapidly attain unprecedented level of productivity for recent hires.

NAT: In-depth knowledge of capital markets and corporate finance.

AGT: Achieved reputation for expertise in capital markets and corporate finance.

NAT: Assisted marketing department in strategies and bids.

AGT: Actively participated in formulating highly regarded marketing strategies.

NAT: Reduced expenses by 10%.

AGT: Drastically slashed (or cut) expenses by 10%.

In short, aggressive writing makes you **SIZZLE**, while passive writing tells your "story." Remember **your goal is to effectively market yourself, not to author your employment biography**. Although already mentioned, the following bears repeating: ***There is a HUGE difference between 'telling' and 'SELLING'!***