Do’s and don’ts for cover letters

Writing isn’t easy; all the more reason to revise and rewrite a cover letter until it sparkles.

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CTW Features

Wonder why you’re not getting that interview? It could have to do with the cover letter.

A cover letter should be considered a jobseeker’s “pitch” to an employer. It should be well crafted and directed towards a specific job.

A cover letter is a marketing communications tool, says Wendy S. Enelow, trainer, career consultant and co-author of “Cover Letter Magic: Trade Secrets of Professional Resume Writers” (Jist Works, 2010).

“Your cover letter, much like your résumé, is designed to sell you to your target audience, namely a prospective employer,” she says.

Enelow says to send a cover letter 100 percent of the time, whether the employer asks for it or not.

“It allows you to share certain information that may not be appropriate in a résumé,” she says. “In your cover letter you get to talk to somebody a little.”

The cover letter should match the person, the profession and the targeted position, what Enelow calls the “three P’s.” It needs to be directed at your target audience.

Your pitch will be different for each audience you address. The presentation will differ when a job-seeker writes to a 28-year-old graphic designer as opposed to a 45-year-old computer engineer. It should be tailor-made for each individual.

Never include salary figures in a cover letter, Enelow says.

“Research has shown that even if they ask for... salary history or salary requirements and you don’t provide it, if the recruiter or hiring company is interested in you, they’ll contact you anyway.” Enelow says.

Highlight certain achievements from your résumé in the cover letter, Enelow says, but don’t repeat it verbatim.

Use a cover letter to distinguish yourself from other candidates, highlighting your unique selling points. Rather than focusing on tasks, discuss the results accomplished. “Don’t just tell me what you did, but tell me how well you did it,” Enelow says.

Keep your cover letter short — no longer than one page. Write in short paragraphs and use bullet points. The more white space the better, Enelow says.

“Your cover letter, just like your résumé, needs to have what I call a strong presenceability factor,” Enelow says. “Lots of white space and people can quickly review it.”

Spelling, grammar and factual errors in a cover letter can be fatal. The employer is unlikely to get past them to your résumé.

Writing a cover letter may be an art form, but the more you write, the better you’ll get.

INTERVIEW TIPS:

Don’t forget to send thank-you notes

Little things separate success from failure. In this year’s slalom event at the Vancouver Olympics a mere 14-hundredths of a second was the difference between a gold medal and a bronze medal. Consider that a blink of an eye takes an interminable one-third of a second. For jobseekers, a thank-you letter just might provide this small but decisive winning margin.

Thank-you notes demonstrate that you are a polite person. And it’s not just your mom who’s likely to be impressed with this small social gesture. People skills are important in the workplace, even in laboring jobs. Showing that you know enough, and know how, to express thanks is a plus.

On a practical level, a thank-you note reminds the interviewer who you are. This is a big advantage in a competitive market, when companies interview multiple job hopefuls.

A thank-you note is an elegant way to get across any points you forgot to highlight during the interview. And, it provides the opportunity to ask additional questions.

A thank-you note is also a strong way to reaffirm your interest in the job. Before you get to “Sincerely,” be sure to mention your desire to call the interviewer on a certain date in order to ask about your status with the job.

It’s a small thing — but it can make all the difference.

— Bob Lankard/CTW Features