

Make Your Cover Letter Count in a Competitive Job Market

by Kelli Robinson

Today's primary modes of communication are e-mail, text messages, and web pages. The job search process is no different. Most job searches are done on the Internet, and job seekers e-mail their resumes or complete online applications.

Given these facts: Are cover letters still necessary? While the answer varies, the majority of human resource representatives and recruiters say yes. Done the right way, a cover letter can capture the second glance needed in a competitive job market. There are two tips for crafting a catchy cover letter: follow the formula and personalize it.

Tip #1: Follow the formula

Cover letters contain four components with one essential question answered in each.

Paragraph One – Introduction: Who are you and why are you writing?

Paragraph Two – Highlight of Qualifications: How has your education, previous employment, or other experiences prepared you for the position?

Paragraph Three – Connection to the Company: Why is this company or job a good fit for you?

Paragraph Four – Closing Statement: How interested are you and where can you be reached for an interview?

Tip #2: Personalize it

Paragraphs one and four follow standard formats. The opportunity for your application to connect with a recruiter is in paragraphs two and three.

Paragraph Two: Draw attention to yourself

When you read the job description and you declared, "I'm perfect for this job!" Tell the recruiter why. Is it because of a particular course you studied? Did you complete an internship that allowed you to perform similar duties and responsibilities? Were you able to develop a skill set through a part-time job or campus activity that is applicable to this position?

Make the connection between your past and this job. Don't repeat your resume, but rather make reference to items on it that you especially want the recruiter to be aware of.

Paragraph Three: "Professional Flattery"

Your job search will reveal many positions for which you are qualified, but not all of them are of interest. What makes this position or company different? Pinpoint specifics about the job description that catch your eye. Research the organization. If the company product or workplace philosophy is appealing, tell the recruiter why.

Avoid empty compliments. Recruiters can spot meaningless sweet talk a mile away.

Pitfalls to Avoid

Applicants sometimes forget professionalism, and even common sense, when it comes to e-mailing and the job search. If your e-mail contains any of the following, hit the delete button.

- A risqué e-mail address. Use a basic e-mail address comprised of your name, initials, or something similar. Save Partygirl@hotmail.com or Rugbyrocks@gmail.com for corresponding with friends.
- Greeting the recruiter by their first name. If you know the recruiter's name, don't forget that Mr. or Ms. is still necessary. Just because Ms. Jane Doe lists her first name doesn't mean you can call her Jane.
- A salutation that doesn't begin with "Dear." This is a business letter. Beginning the correspondence with "Greetings," "Hello," or "Hi There!" is not acceptable.
- Emoticons. 8-) :-(;-) Emoticons are used to convey attitudes or emotions, both of which are irrelevant in a cover letter.
- Acronyms. LOL, COB, FAQs. As with emoticons, acronyms have no place in job-search correspondence, unless they are standard acronyms, such as that used for a company or association. For example: NACE (National Association of Colleges and Employers) is appropriate. "The 411 about NACE is very positive" is not.

Sample Job Posting and Cover Letter to Match

Here is an actual job posting from NACELink.

Job Title: Inside Pharmaceutical Sales

Job Description:

1. Communicate with healthcare professionals over the phone to introduce "Pharma Company, Inc." products for tough to treat illnesses such as tough to treat back pain.
2. Maintain existing relationship and develop new relationship in your own territory.
3. Responsible for revenue growth for the given territory.

Qualifications:

Self motivated. Good communication skills. BS/BA or above in healthcare related field such as biological science, nursing, and pharmacy or in business administration related disciplines. Experience preferred but not necessary.

Here is a sample cover letter tailored specifically to the position description.

November 3, 2008

Ms. Jane Doe
College Employment Recruiter
Pharma Company, Inc.
jdoe@pharma.company.com

Dear Ms. Doe:

I would like to apply for the pharmaceutical sales position with Pharma Company, Inc. that was posted on the ABC College Career Services web site (October 29, 2008). My resume is included within this e-mail for your review.

I believe my education, internship, and work experience have afforded me the opportunity to develop the qualifications you are seeking. Upon earning a BS in Management this spring, I will have a solid foundation in the business field. ABC College's School of Business requires students to study coursework in all areas of business in addition to specialization within a major. My internship in the Management Trainee program with XYZ Department Stores let me apply my business knowledge to the working environment. In addition to this internship, I continued to work my part-time sales associate position with XYZ, where I consistently met monthly sales goals.

Having researched Pharm Company, Inc., I welcome the opportunity to begin my career with your organization. A company that requires self-motivation in its employees is a good fit for me. While attending college, my part-time and summer employment helped me self-finance 50 percent of my college education. I look forward to the challenges and opportunities Pharma Company provides for its work force.

Thank you in advance for your consideration of my application. Should you have any questions I can be reached at (404) 555-1212 or via e-mail at ssmith@abc.edu. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,
Sally Smith

Updated 8/10/2010