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## AN INTRODUCTION TO COVER LETTERS



The cover letter that accompanies your employment resume is perhaps one of the most important letters you will ever write. Other than your resume, it is the single key document that will introduce you to a prospective employer and, if well-written, pave the way to that all important job interview. It is an integral part of your overall job-hunting campaign, and it can make or break you, depending upon how well it is written. Construction of this document should, therefore, be given very careful attention. The care that you give to writing this letter will certainly be a major factor in getting your job search off to an excellent start. Conversely, a poorly written letter is sure to scuttle your campaign before it even begins.

### The Purpose of the Cover Letter

Before you can expect to write an effective cover letter, you must understand its purpose. Without a clear understanding of what this letter is intended to accomplish, chances are it will be poorly designed, vague, and generally ineffective. On the other hand, understanding the purpose of this letter is paramount to maximizing its impact and effectiveness.

What is the purpose of the cover letter? What is it intended to do?

Well, first and foremost, it is a business letter used to transmit your resume to a prospective employer. So, it is a business transmittal letter. Second, it is a letter of introduction. It is used not only to transmit your resume but also to introduce you and your background to the employer. Third, and importantly, it is a sales letter, intended to convince the prospective employer that you have something valuable to contribute and that it will be worth the employer's time to grant you an interview.

To summarize, then, the purpose of a cover letter is:

1. To serve as a business transmittal letter for your resume.
2. To introduce you and your employment credentials to the employer.
3. To generate employer interest in interviewing you.

Certainly, knowing that these are the three main objectives of a well-written cover letter will provide you with some basic starting points. We will be further discussing these objectives and the related elements

of good design throughout this book. For now, it is important to simply keep these objectives in mind as we further explore the topic of constructing effective cover letters.

### From the Employer's Perspective

When contemplating good cover letter design and construction, it is important to keep one very important fact in mind: The cover letter must be written from the employer's perspective.

Stated differently, good cover letter writing must take into consideration the end result you seek in employer action. More specifically, you want the employer to grant you an interview, so it is important to understand those factors that will motivate an employer to do so. To understand this important phenomenon, it is necessary to realistically address the following questions:

1. How does the employer read the cover letter?
2. What are the key factors the employer is looking for (and expects to find) in the cover letter?
3. What are the motivational factors that will pique the employer's curiosity and create a desire to interview you?

I think you will agree that these are some important questions to ask if you are to be successful in designing cover letters that will be truly helpful to your job-hunting program. You must pay close attention to the needs of the prospective employer, rather than just your own, if you expect to write cover letters that will motivate him or her to take action. Cover letters must, therefore, be "employer focused" rather than "job-searcher focused" if you want to really maximize their overall effectiveness.

Top sales producers have always known that the most important principle in sales success, whether selling goods or services, is selling to the needs of the buyer. What is the customer really buying? Where are the priorities? What specific needs does he or she need to satisfy? Without knowing the answers to these questions, it is easy for the salesperson to emphasize product characteristics and attributes that have absolutely no relationship to the customer's real needs, and de-emphasize characteristics and attributes that are truly important. The result—no sale!

Ideally, therefore, it is important to research your target companies very well to determine what it is that they are buying (i.e., looking for in a successful employment candidate). If you are conducting a general broadcast campaign covering several hundred companies, such individual company research may simply not be feasible. If, on the other hand, you are targeting a dozen or so employers for whom you would really like to work, such research is not only feasible but should be considered an “absolute must.” Careful advance research, in this case, will pay huge dividends, returning your initial investment of time and effort manyfold.

Even in the case of the general broadcast campaign, where you have targeted several hundred companies, there are some things that you can do to focus your cover letters on the real needs of these employers. Here are some guidelines for conducting meaningful employer needs research:

1. Divide your target list of employers into industry groupings.
2. Using industry trade publications and key newspapers (available in most libraries), thoroughly research each industry grouping for answers to the following questions:
  - a. What is the general state of this industry?
  - b. What are the major problems faced by companies in this industry?
  - c. What are the barriers or roadblocks that stand in the way of solving these problems?
  - d. What knowledge, skills, and capabilities are needed to address these problems and roadblocks?
  - e. What major trends and changes are being undertaken by companies in this industry?
  - f. What new knowledge, skills, and capabilities are needed to successfully orchestrate these changes and trends?

Having conducted this type of general research, you are now in a position to better focus your cover letter on key needs and areas of interest to the majority of companies in each of your targeted industry groupings. This provides you with the opportunity to showcase your overall knowledge, skills, and capabilities in relation to those important needs areas. Such focusing substantially increases your

chances for hitting the employer's bull's-eye, which will result in job interviews.

Where you can narrow your list to a dozen or so key companies, individual company research can have even greater payoff. Here, you have the opportunity to really zero in on the specific needs of the employer, and you can bring into play a number of research techniques for doing so. The research you do here can, in fact, be tailored to each individual firm; so you can substantially increase your probability of success and up, by quite a bit, the number of potential interview opportunities.

In many ways, the methodology used in conducting single-firm research is similar to that already described for industry-wide research. You will note some of these similarities as you review the following guidelines for researching the single firm.

1. Determine the firms you would like to target for individual research (firms for which you would really like to work).
2. Using industry trade publications and key newspapers (available at your local library) as well as annual reports, 10K forms, and product literature (available from the target firm's public affairs and marketing departments), thoroughly research for answers to the following questions:
  - a. What is the general state of the company?
  - b. How does it stack up against competition?
  - c. What are the key problems and issues with which it is currently wrestling?
  - d. What are the key barriers that must be removed in order to resolve these problems/issues?
  - e. What knowledge, skills, and capabilities are needed to remove these key barriers?
  - f. What are the company's strategic goals?
  - g. What are the key changes that will need to come about for realization of these goals?
  - h. What new knowledge, skills, and capabilities will be needed to bring about these critical changes?

Here, as with research of industry groupings, individual company research enables you to use the cover letter to highlight your knowledge,

skills, and capabilities in areas that are of importance to the firm. In the case of individual firm research, however, there is the added advantage of being able to tailor the cover letter to target your qualifications to very specific, known needs of the employer. This can provide you with a substantial competitive advantage!

Another technique that you should employ when doing individual firm research is networking. If you don't already belong, you might consider joining specific industry or professional associations to which employees of your individual target firms belong. Using your common membership in these organizations as the basis, you can call these employees for certain inside information. Here are some questions you might consider asking:

1. Is the firm hiring people in your functional specialty?
2. Are there openings in this group now?
3. Who within the company is the key line manager (i.e., outside human resources) responsible for hiring for this group?
4. What are the key things this manager tends to look for in a successful candidate (e.g., technical knowledge, skills, style)?
5. What key problems/issues is the group currently wrestling with?
6. What kinds of skills and capabilities are they looking for to address these issues?
7. What are the major strategic changes this group is attempting to bring about?
8. What qualifications and attributes is the group seeking to help them orchestrate these strategic changes?

Answers to these questions can give you a tremendous competitive advantage when designing an effective cover letter and employment resume. You will have substantial ammunition for targeting and highlighting those qualifications of greatest interest to the employer. Here, you can make the most of your opportunity for successful self-marketing by focusing on the critical needs not only of the organization but of the functional hiring group as well. Clearly, this is a technique you should employ if you want to maximize your chances of getting hired!

The underlying principle behind this needs research methodology, whether industry grouping or individual company research, is that

organizations are always looking for individuals who will be “value adding”—that is, individuals who can help them solve key problems and realize their strategic goals. These are the candidates who are seen as the value-adding change agents—the leaders who will help move the company ahead and enhance its competitive position rather than allow it to stagnate. Employer needs research will allow you to design effective cover letters that can truly set you apart from the competition and substantially improve your chances for landing interviews.

### How Cover Letters Are Read

Although, in many cases, such practice can be self-defeating, the great majority of resumes and accompanying cover letters are often sent to the attention of the employment or human resources department. It is here that the cover letter probably least serves the interests of the job seeker.

The truth of the matter is that most human resources and employment professionals are unlikely to pay much real attention to the cover letter. In the course of a year, it is estimated that the employment manager of a medium- to large-size company may read over 20,000 resumes along with accompanying cover letters. This considerable experience has led most professionals to conclude that cover letters seldom add little meaningful information to that already provided in the resume itself. Such letters are usually of the “broadcast” variety and are frequently redundant to the resume.

Having learned this, the employment or human resources manager will normally give the cover letter only a cursory glance and first concentrate on reading the resume. This is because the resume details the specifics of the candidate’s background and qualifications and is used for comparing these qualifications with the hiring manager’s specific requirements.

When reading the cover letter, the employment manager will usually look to see if it is the mass-mailed “broadcast” kind, or if it is more personal or specific to the company. Managers usually try to ferret out letters that indicate any kind of firsthand association with the company—for example, friends of employees and executives, shareholders, and local community leaders. These letters normally require a more personal response, and care is taken so that an inappropriate form response is not accidentally sent. Unfortunately, however, cover letters of

a less personal nature normally receive very little initial attention from employment/personnel professionals.

If this is the case, then why write a book on cover letters? Why take time to provide advice to people on how to best design and construct such letters if they are barely read? The answer to this is fairly simple. I am recommending that, in most cases, you not send your cover letter and resume to the human resources or employment departments of the firms that you have targeted for your mailing. Instead, I am strongly recommending, where at all possible, that you address your correspondence to a specific individual within the corporation. This person should be at a fairly high level and should be within the particular business function or discipline most closely related to the position for which you are applying. Thus, if you are a tax accountant, you will want to direct your letter to the director of taxes. Similarly, if you are an engineering manager, you will want to write to either the director or vice president of engineering. If you are already at the director or vice president level, however, you should correspond with the firm's president or chief executive officer.

What is the logic behind my recommendation to send your cover letter and resume directly to the line function rather than the personnel department? Again, the answer is fairly simple. The reason is that the employment manager, in many cases, has knowledge only of those positions that are currently open. He or she may be totally unaware of the future hiring needs of line managers—needs that they are thinking about filling at some future point. In some cases, “some future point” can be as immediate as next week or next month. A well-written cover letter accompanying a resume may be just the thing that causes the hiring executive to move ahead and fill the position now.

A line manager will usually read the cover letter a little more thoroughly than will the employment manager. The motivation is different. The employment manager is simply looking for credentials that match a current open position, whereas the line manager (the one who does the actual hiring) is looking for solutions to existing problems; new ideas for bringing improvement to the organization; understanding of new, emerging business concepts and trends; and so forth. In general, this manager is looking for ways to add value to the organization. He or she will thus tend to read the cover letter and resume more closely, with a view toward addressing the aforementioned need categories. Your well-constructed cover letter and resume may suggest that you can help to address these needs—that you are someone who could add

real value to the organization. The result could well be an invitation for an employment interview.

Here is further evidence that supports the importance of target company needs research. If, through good research, you can pinpoint the specific problems, trends, and strategic objectives of this employer (and specifically the hiring manager), you have a much better basis for constructing a highly focused cover letter that addresses them. If your particular knowledge and qualifications suggest that you may have some good answers, and you have highlighted this in your cover letter, you have created what is known in economics as the “accelerator effect” and have increased the probability of an employment interview manyfold.

In summary, the way a cover letter is written should directly relate to the way it will likely be read. Where possible, through good advance research (either by industry grouping or by individual firm), it should be designed to highlight your qualifications to solve contemporary problems, facilitate current trends, apply state-of-the-art methodology, and drive desired strategic change. To maximize effectiveness, your letter must convey a sense that you are a person who will be adding value in those key areas where the target company is looking for answers and desires improvement.

Your cover letters thus need to be “reader aligned” rather than “writer aligned.” They must address the real needs of the prospective employer, not just your needs. The key to such alignment is advance research, without which your letters will be like buckshot in a strong wind rather than a well-aimed single shot directed at the center of the bull’s eye. It is likely to miss the target and cripple an otherwise well-planned job search process.

### The Advantages of a Good Cover Letter

This chapter has, I hope, served to increase your awareness of the importance of a good cover letter to your job-hunting campaign. Let’s explore this topic in greater depth, however, so that you can more fully appreciate its importance.

It is important to realize, right from the beginning, that the employment cover letter is, in most cases, the very first contact that you will have with the employer. The important thing to realize here is that

if the letter is poorly written, many employers may never even bother to go as far as to read your resume; it can be an automatic turnoff, leading the employer to move on to the next cover letter and resume. A poor cover letter can screen you out of the employment selection process before you even get started. You may never have an opportunity to compete.

The appearance of the cover letter, as with the resume, makes a personal statement about you to the prospective employer. If it is ill-conceived, disorganized, and sloppy, it will suggest that you are disorganized and sloppy in your work. It may also suggest that you don't care about the impression you make on others and that you are not particularly well motivated. Likewise, if the cover letter rambles and lacks focus, it may suggest that you are verbose and nonfocused, generally lacking a sense of organization.

By contrast, a well-planned, well-written, highly focused cover letter will make quite a different statement about you to a prospective employer. It will suggest that you are very thorough and careful, and that you take a great deal of pride in your work. It may also suggest that you are well-organized, strategic, focused, and results-oriented. Thus, there is a decided upgrade to your job-hunting campaign through the use of well-planned, well-designed cover letters that create a highly favorable impression.

Besides a favorable image, a good cover letter also provides you with an excellent vehicle to highlight key aspects of your credentials that are closely related to major needs of the prospective employer. In this sense, if well-written and properly focused, it can do a much better job of selling your value to a prospective employer than can the accompanying resume, which leaves the employer with the challenge of wandering through a maze of information to ferret out those qualifications that are truly relevant to his or her contemporary needs. The cover letter can thus become an extremely forceful sales tool for persuading the employer that a job interview would be a very worthwhile investment.

It cannot be overemphasized that the effectiveness of the cover letter as a sales tool is directly related to the quality of your advance research on the real needs of the firms on your target list. Although well-organized and well-written, if your cover letter fails to focus on the major needs of the employer, a substantial opportunity to maximize its sales effectiveness is lost, and the direct result will likely be dramatically reduced interview opportunities.

It's up to you, then, to make the cover letter what it can be—a significant enhancement to your job-hunting campaign or a negative drain that casts you in a poor light and substantially detracts from your access to excellent job and career opportunities. The choice is yours!

The following chapters will provide you with the help you will need to plan, construct, and write cover letters that are targeted to the needs of employers and that maximize your opportunities for employment interviews—the perfect cover letter, so to speak.