

Cover Letters that Work for You

by Jan Cannon

One of the most effective ways to let a potential employer know about your experience and skills is the cover letter. No resume should be sent naked (without a cover letter), even if it's submitted online. The cover letter is the place where you can focus the reader's attention on the elements of your resume that reflect your ability to do the job at hand. In fact, the author of the book, *Throw Away Your Resume*, recommends that you only use a cover letter that incorporates the relevant parts of your resume. If you're not willing to go that far, here are some tips for writing a great cover letter.

- Make it short. One page only; basically three paragraphs. The reader isn't going to be willing to spend the time reading a short novel. Plus, if you can't get the important information on one page you might be seen as disorganized or unfocused.
- Acknowledge how you heard about the position. Was it a referral from a current employee? A newspaper ad? Job fair booth representative? Of course, a referral is your best choice, but if you don't have one it's valuable for the employer to know which recruiting resources are working. Reference both the job title and the source of your information in the opening paragraph.
- One technique to highlight your skills was suggested by a recruiter at King and Bishop. She likes to see two bulleted lists side by side comparing the job requirements listed in the ad and the job experience of the candidate. For a more conventional paragraph, take the same approach – select some of the job requirements and describe how you've met them in a sentence format.
- Finally, have an action step in the last paragraph: you'll call for an appointment, you'll contact them by e-mail to see if they have any questions, etc. Like a good salesperson, you need to ask for the sale. Indicate how excited you are about this position with this company, mentioning that your experience meshes with their needs. Then tell them you want the job. Well, not in so many words, but you get the idea.
- Then, since this is a business letter, simply say, "Regards" or "Sincerely" and leave a space for your signature and then type your name. If you don't have your contact information at the top of the letter, put it under your name at the signature. If your letter and resume get separated, the reader of one or the other has a way to contact you if needed.

Writing letters is fast becoming a lost art because of telephones and e-mail. If you have trouble writing a good letter, check out the library for books on writing letters or find websites that have cover letter samples. Show you have the right stuff for the job by writing a great cover letter.