Cover Letters -- Dos and Don'ts

By Robin Ryan, career expert and author of 'Winning Cover Letter'

The biggest mistake many job hunters make is skipping writing a cover letter when sending off a resume, says Jim, an AT&T human resource manager. He shares his insight, saying, "Cover letters are very influential, and a well written letter can grab an interview just on its own merit. It's too bad most job hunters are so lazy they don't write one. That's an error no savvy job hunter wants to make.

"Writing cover letters is hard for most people so they talk themselves into not doing it. That's number one on our "don't" list. We published a survey of over 600 hiring managers including the exact formula employers want you to use in "Winning Cover Letters."

Here are some key ones to keep in mind:

- **Don't lose them with your first sentence.** According to the survey results, a cover letter and resume often only get a 15-second glance, so your first line either grabs the reader's attention or loses it. Hiring managers prefer you use a powerful first sentence that summarizes the top skills and experience you can bring to the job. For example, "Five years experience as project manager with a proven track record of being on time and within budget is the background I'd bring to your position." Always skip beginning with overused standard, "I'm applying for the ad I saw on your Web site."

- **Do sell the meat.** Poorly written, generic form letters never work. More than 90 percent of the hiring managers agreed that specifics sell. Mike, a vice-president of human resources, points out "The cover letter is the very first thing we see. To stand out, use short powerful evidence detailing past achievements, skills, experience and results you've achieved. Forget offering boring details and endless job descriptions -- results is what gets attention."

- **Do demonstrate that you can write.** Many employers noted that they view cover letters as samples of someone's communication ability since they likely wrote the letter themselves. Be sure to be concise, articulate and never more than one page.

- **Do illustrate the qualifications needed.** Many applicants do not address the qualifications requested in the job listing -- big mistake. The better strategy is to address each specific qualification and state the experience and skills you possess to perform that task or function.

- **Don't let careless errors torpedo you.** Hiring managers hate typos and spelling mistakes. People can avoid this fatal mistake if they carefully proofread before they send. Good layout and presentation that is easy to read are essential. Microscopic type is a bad choice since small font type sizes can make addresses, phone numbers and e-mails illegible. Arial is a good font choice, size 12 point, especially when the faxing process can often blur the type.

- **Do list contact info.** Cover letters can be separated from resumes. Be sure your name, address, home or cell phone number and personal e-mail are on the letter. You would be amazed to know how many people forget this all-important component.

*The entire survey, the results, major mistakes to avoid, plus sample cover letters are published in the book "Winning Cover Letters," 2nd Edition, by Robin Ryan.*

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