

YES, COVER LETTERS DO MATTER!

By Jodie Perram

I am always staggered by people who send through their resume with no cover letter, in my mind it is like making a phone call to someone without saying "Hello" to open the conversation.

A cover letter is how you make a great first impression, it's a way to say "you really should meet me straight away, I am the one you are looking for!" (but not exactly in those words). If you work in the professional space, it is absolutely *essential* to send one with every application. A cover letter is part of your 'brand' – it is marketing, it is how you introduce who you *are*.

It's important to know though, that a cliché-filled, dull, generic cover letter sent out *en masse* puts most people to sleep and is not going to help you. Receiving a cover letter with personality can make a recruiter's day and makes you stand out from the crowd.

I know not everyone is a natural communicator, or maybe you are relying on advice you received 10-20 years ago that isn't quite up-to-date with modern job application etiquette, so I've put together a 101 to creating a cover letter that works.

FIRST THINGS FIRST

If you do nothing else, the absolute #1 thing you need to do is ensure that the cover letter is addressed to the person who is receiving your application. If the person you need to address it to is not mentioned in an advert, then a quick phone call to the company will solve the problem – this is not difficult. There is nothing special about receiving a cover letter addressed to "To Whom It May Concern", or even worse, "Dear Sirs" (especially considering around 65% of HR professionals in Australia are women). Take the time to address your letter to the right person, that little bit of extra effort is impressive.

Of course, if you are taking the time to address the letter to me, make sure you send me the right one. I make no secret that I instantly disregard any application that is addressed to the wrong person or is quite obviously an application for another role. Yes, this happens all the time. I recently had an application sent in for a receptionist role and the cover letter was addressed to another recruiter, at another company, for an entirely different role. This shows incredibly poor attention to detail, but also makes me wonder why you are applying for a receptionist role but also a senior management position – I can only assume you don't care about my job, so I look for someone who actually wants the job I have on offer.

Now, the Cover Letter 101s...

COVER LETTER 101s**READ THE WHOLE ADVERT (more than once!)****1**

Make a list of the key words and write down or highlight the skills and attributes outlined. If you have these attributes and skills, make sure you (succinctly) mention them in your cover letter – especially if your resume doesn't showcase all your abilities (of course, if you don't have something we want, please don't lie about it!). Make sure that if you are asked to include anything specific (like a cover letter) that you follow instructions – sometimes these things are included specifically to see if you are paying attention.

2**BE YOU, YOURSELF AND YOU**

Don't be afraid to be a little bit conversational in your tone, or tell us why you personally want this job – try not to go overboard and keep it appropriate to the job you are applying for, but it's ok to be yourself!

3**IT'S IN THE DETAILS**

Grammar, spelling and writing things that make sense are all very very important – proofread – once, twice, thrice, and get someone else to proofread. Remember that a cover letter is a marketing document – you need to take care in how it is constructed as it is a first impression.

4**RESEARCH, RESEARCH, RESEARCH**

If an advert mentions the company (which for privacy reasons, recruitment company adverts rarely do), make sure you research the company and mention some of the things about them that make them attractive as an employer to you – or better yet, explain in your cover letter what special skills and knowledge you could bring to the company which would add value to them.

5**CONCISE IS KEY**

Unless an advert specifies that you must write a 'selection criteria' (e.g. a government job), short, sharp and to the point is my recommendation, try to keep the cover letter to around 3 paragraphs, it is the job of the cover letter to introduce you and add some personality to the resume that is accompanying the letter, it is not a novel, and unfortunately, it will get over-looked if it is pages long, or regurgitates what is already apparent from your resume.

6**LEAVE THE ARROGANCE AT THE DOOR**

In my personal opinion, one of the biggest 'no-no's of a cover letter is saying "I am the perfect person for the job". Now I will admit that 17-year-old me did make this mistake. Luckily I managed to land the job anyway, but I quickly realised that I definitely was not the perfect person for it! That statement demonstrates you know what the company is like to work for, you know the management style suits you and know what the unwritten expectations of the role are, (beware: sometimes an amazing, positive, well-written advert is not always an accurate reflection of the job, or the company!). If nothing else, it is at worst, arrogant, and at best, a total cliché.

THINGS TO BEAR IN MIND... FROM A RECRUITERS POV.

I will be the first to admit that a lot of recruiters don't respect the time and effort put in by applicants. It can be so demoralising to put a lot of work into an application, only to receive a 'thanks but no thanks' – or even worse – no response at all. The best advice I can offer is:

1. Make sure you are only applying for jobs that you meet the key criteria for (and make it obvious in your cover letter). If you aren't sure you meet the criteria, go ahead and call us before you put in too much time and effort to your application.
2. Follow up with recruiters for feedback if you are not successful for a job that you thought you met all the criteria for (and use this feedback constructively!). When you do call or e-mail, please remember that we are people – whilst we know you may be frustrated, being abusive and rude, or making assumptions about why you were 'rejected' just makes us have a bad day, is not going to help your job search.
3. Remember that effectively looking for a job is hard work (for the unemployed, it can be a full-time job!) and the more time and effort you put in to making yourself stand out for the right reasons, the more likely it is you will get a phone call inviting you for an interview.

So... get writing, stand out, and create something that gets you in front of the interviewer – it gets even more exciting after that!