

## Love Letters to Ideal Future Employees - By Nektaria Hamister

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I think of employment ads and descriptions as personalized letters to ideal candidates. Trying to screen out inferior candidates is useless at this stage: they are desperate and will apply no matter what I write, whether they have the credentials or not. I concentrate all my attention on the person who will love the particular job and whom we will love as a co-worker.

The goal of a good employment ad is exactly the same as the goal of any advertising--it's sales. An employment ad should sell an employer and a position. I want the ideal candidate to feel that I am describing a position that is perfect for her. In *The Little Blue Book of Advertising* Steve Lance and Jeff Woll write: 'successful advertising appeals on a one-to-one basis. Personalize it.' The same principle yields improved results when applied to employment advertising, whether it is in print, on websites, or on free college career center sites. Since we began publishing attractive, individualized ads, our responses have increased both in quality and quantity.

### **Know the candidate**

In order to make someone feel that I am speaking directly to him, I need to learn who he is. I have conversations with the person's future supervisor, with a successful person in the same or a similar position, and other colleagues. I ask them to describe the individual who will thrive in the job. Is she a student? A recent graduate? An experienced individual looking to take the next step in her career? A parent who needs flexible hours? What are his personality characteristics? The more I can learn about the ideal candidate, the more I can tailor the ad for him.

### **What's in it for me?**

Once we know who the ideal person is, we can begin to discuss what will he enjoy about the job and what we offer in return for his service. This is different for each position and each business, so I individualize according to the position. I need to know specifics. Will she work with an especially supportive and knowledgeable supervisor? Do we offer training to less experienced individuals, a newly renovated building, an especially fun team, or promotion opportunities? For instance, some of our best personal care assistants are nursing students. We therefore wrote an ad (and placed it for free on the site of a local nursing school) with the headline 'A Head Start on Your Health Care Career.' We described our hands-on approach to geriatric health care, training programs, and our willingness to accommodate academic schedules. This targeted description continues to produce a steady stream of quality applications.

I also ask closely related co-workers what they like about the company or their jobs. These conversations take time, but they rarely fail to produce new and useful insight. *The Little Blue Book of Advertising* tells readers to find their difference: 'You would never go to a singles club to sell yourself as 'just like everyone else.' Why sell your brand that way?' Each of our businesses has several distinguishing characteristics. For example, we were searching for a new hotel general manager. The hotel was newly renovated and the general manager of its sister property was an extremely outgoing, supportive, and experienced individual. I therefore highlighted both the renovation and the mentorship capabilities of the other general manager in the description.

### **Sandwich Duties between Advantages**

Mary Kay Ash of Mary Kay Cosmetics told managers to 'sandwich every bit of criticism between two heavy layers of praise.' I sandwich requirements and duties between two heavy layers of advantages. I am very careful, however, to make sure that I emphasize the benefits and enjoyments that would appeal to our dream candidate, sometimes I even omit advantages that would appeal to the wrong person. For example, in some assisted living ads we have chosen not to mention competitive pay, even though we were offering a good salary. We did this in order to attract candidates who were primarily interested in the satisfaction caring for seniors and serving their families, a person motivated by a high salary would have been a wrong fit.

### **The proper place of qualifications and responsibilities**

Necessary qualifications and duties are an important part of any employment description: the ideal candidate wants details about her future job and its challenges. But the ad should never become an insipid list of requirements (which is, unfortunately, what most employment ads are). Responsibilities and requirements need positive and specific presentation: the same duties can look like drudgery or career opportunities depending upon the way in which they are described. A mediocre ad for a hotel front office manager might say: 'duties include: handling all aspects of group accommodation, resolving guest complaints, working with other department heads to ensure guest satisfaction, and supervising front office staff.' A more appealing restatement of the same duties (targeted specifically toward a high-achiever without management experience) would be: 'You will gain experience in group accommodation by handling all aspects of group arrivals, stays, and departures. You will have the opportunity to further your knowledge of other aspects of hotel operations by working in partnership with department heads. As our Front Office Manager, you will continue to provide superior guest care by supervising Front Office operations, interacting with customers, overseeing guest services, resolving guest service issues, and providing a shining example to your staff.'

## **What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet (not!)**

Names and titles are very important. 'What do you do?' is one of the most common questions after a social introduction. I want to give people a title that instills pride, both during the application process and after they are hired. There is value in each job. We need to find a title that reflects that value. One of our assisted living residences recently had a culinary department opening. They wanted a 'cook' with a culinary degree and various other qualifications superior to the credentials of an average cook, I was afraid that the ideal candidate would feel undervalued by the title. 'Chef' did not work because this individual would work under the supervision of our regular chef. So we searched for a new title and found 'Sous Chef'-common in the restaurant business, but not so frequent in assisted living. 'Sous Chef' was the perfect title: one that reflected the value, pride, and duties of the particular job.

### **The Black List**

Many phrases commonly used in employment ads are a waste of space and money: 'professional appearance,' 'high-quality individual,' 'excellent communication skills,' and 'salary commensurate with ability' are among my pet-peeves. Do we really think that someone is going to say, 'ah, they want a high-quality individual and I'm a low life, so I won't apply'? Or, 'they want someone with a professional appearance and I don't have any dress sense, so I won't waste their time'? Harry Chambers, author of *Finding, Hiring, and Keeping Peek Performers* disdains the phrases 'strong people skills,' 'self-starter,' 'strong technical skills,' and 'goal-oriented.' According to Chambers, the problem with these global statements is that no one knows what they really mean. Not only are such phrases empty, but they are also a distraction from the more meaty parts of the position description.

Re-thinking employment ads as love letters to ideal candidates is not about getting romantic: it's about knowing whom you are going to love as a co-worker and showing them what they are going to love about their new job. High-achievers have their choice of employers. Love letters help increase the chances that they will choose you.

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