

"The 'Ah Ha' About Resumes"

This article is about the basics that apply to Managers as well as Vice Presidents.

"Why Are Resumes So Bad?"

I have asked myself hundreds of times, "Why are resumes so bad?" This is particularly embarrassing for Communications and Investor Relations professionals who should know better, but they don't. Yes, I will admit the unvarnished truth is that in the 30+ years that I have been reading **resumes, they range from downright embarrassing to adequate.**

Another truism, if you have a professional (i.e. outplacement firm) help, then instead of being better, it reads like an outplacement firm canned resume. Unfortunately, success in the communications and IR fields requires so many talents, that following one recipe doesn't work for all the flavors of experience. And with the advent of social media, the candidate is being held to an even higher quality level—meaning the resume must be tailored precisely to the situation.

Another problem is taking advice literally and doing what those books say about resume writing, rather than interpreting what they mean. (I'm giving authors the benefit of the doubt, here.) This is another theme of the article, **use the "common sense" test to weed out advice** that you instinctively know makes no sense. If it feels wrong to you, it is most probably bad advice 9 out of 10 times.

I once coached a top-flight marcom executive about her resume and suddenly came to a realization about why these documents are so tough to get right. That's when the "Ah Ha" (the light bulb phenomenon) happened.

Is the resume really about you and your achievements? Wouldn't you expect the answer to be yes? Well my answer is not really. It's all about the hiring manager -- the person who is buying (not you) but what you can do to solve his/her problem, fill a void, and fit the team. So, what do you need to say to grab his/her attention? Are you selling yourself? All the resume guides say "yes." That's where the literalists march off to follow orders. That's where all those marketing types jump in with the formulaic question: Do you need a top executive who can save you \$X or can help you achieve a percent increase in market reach? Oh please, spare me from this banality.

Are You Selling Yourself?

So, let's go back to the question. Are you selling yourself? Are you broadcasting how talented you are by telling the world I am great, or strategic, or results-oriented? Guess what? That's irrelevant and has a negative impact on your key customer, the hiring manager. **By saying, "I'm terrific," you are doing just the opposite.** Don't sell yourself short by advertising who you are. It destroys your credibility.

Instead, you engage your reader and win an interview (that is the objective of a resume, BTW) by giving examples of how you've helped your former employers. It's a far more subtle approach, far more low-key and consultative, which is what a resume is about. **A resume is a one to one communication.** It is about a conversation, a dialog with a potential buyer of an expensive solution -- you. The challenge is there are readers at several levels in an organization that need to be convinced that your resume is a "keeper."

Here's the key: **the resume** is not about "me." **It's about what I can do for you.** Skillfully written, what you want to do is wrapped around what you can do for the hiring organization. Solve their problem (convince them that you are action oriented and focused) by doing what you enjoy most.

I do not recommend ever telling people that you are a results-oriented, strategic, high energy professional. Who isn't? Would anyone ever say, "I'm tactical, slow and am job hunting because I couldn't keep up?" Please eliminate all statements that tell the world you are terrific and that you are a team player.

The only objective a resume should include is one that "fits" what the customer wants. If you don't know what that is, don't put one on the resume. Being vague is a "dead spot" when every element of the resume should be crisp and clear. Am I suggesting you misrepresent yourself?

The answer is never. However, there are many ways you can express what you want. The trick is to put it in terms that make sense to your audience.

Then there is the noise factor -- **resumes should never confuse or waste time.** Summary statements, just like imprecise objectives, with vague job goals, "I want to work for a progressive, high growth company that values individual achievement" or "I have a progressive track record of on-going success" need to be eliminated. They don't tell the hiring manager that you can solve his/her problem.

In the Investor Relations area, there is a case to be made for a list of the various tasks you have executed under "Accomplishments." Your Human Resource reader and the hiring manager (who is sometimes not an IR executive) can find this list a timesaver if they know you must have certain skills and experiences to make it through the first "cut." This tells them up front you are qualified at the task level.

Let's talk about "hype." I think you can guess that there shouldn't be any, despite advice that says to be sure to take credit for accomplishments. Interestingly, I think being too self-effacing is a problem I've seen more among women. There is a balance to strike here that can be difficult to find.

Common Sense

Well, here we are in that difficult gray area where the simple 10-step solution to creating a perfect resume doesn't offer a clue. Let's apply common sense to the issue, oftentimes a rare commodity in these circumstances. Using shopping on the Internet as the perfect analogy, here's what I suggest you consider.

When you visit a website with the intention of learning about a product, you are expecting to be presented with in-depth information. This will allow you to judge whether you should consider a purchase based on its features and/or the quality of the item -- perhaps as endorsed by an objective reviewer (e.g. rated a "superior value by XYZ magazine"). You would resent being "hit" with advertising or sales messages. A resume should take exactly the same informational tone, strive for similar "ease of use" and draw conclusions for the customer. That "pitch" which is far more subtle requires paring down the details and making sure what you say is precisely about accomplishing the task/meeting the objectives and defining your contribution.

"Just the facts" is what your reader needs. So, what does that mean? Here's what you want to say must be expressed so that your customer is happy. Does it mean you can't focus or position the resume? No, absolutely not. It does mean you present your story in a low-key factual style. For example, instead of saying you are a high achieving superstar; let the reader come to that conclusion by following your career progression.

List the company, length of time with the organization and then in reverse chronological order recite your job titles. Use the word "promoted" if it applies. If you were selected from a large pool of applicants, say so. If you were the youngest person ever in the job, say so. If a client or boss or editor said you were terrific, that's fair game to include. If what you did was a first, say so. If you set out objectives for a project and met them, explain that.

Another way **to indicate you are succeeding is by describing the companies you represent**, their business, size and complexity. It's one thing to be a Director for a \$30 million company, quite different to hold that same title at a \$2 billion company. (BTW, always describe the business the company is in. Never assume the reader knows anything about your employer.) If you have direct contact with heads of organizations and are part of planning sessions, that indicates your opinion is valued (without using that beaten-to-death phrase) "strategic contributor."

Case studies are great. **Tell stories about how you organized an event** or, for example, developed the first Investor Relations campaign. Did you brief the chief executive? Write speeches? Create a crisis communications plan? Did you step forward to suggest the communications effort be expanded and win approval? How large are the budgets you've been responsible for? What is the largest group of people you've managed directly? These examples are some of the best ways for a potential employer to judge if you've functioned at a high enough level to tackle his/her assignment. (Or, conversely if you are overqualified.)

If this sounds like you are writing a 4-page resume, that is exactly what not to do. The point is to keep it to 2-pages and tighten down the copy so you are not cluttering the page. (While resumes are submitted on-line, people download resumes and read them as hard copies. Keep the look of a resume inviting, not daunting.)

Just because you've spent 50% of your time doing media relations (and you've decided you prefer editorial work), you do not have to focus your resume on media relations. If you prefer one direction over another, emphasize that aspect of your work. **Positioning is legitimate** and the resume can lead a potential employer down the path you want to go.

My final point: **shorter is better**. Remember the 2-page rule (and don't try to cram more on the page by adjusting the margins or lowering the font size). Do not send a hard copy of your resume; also, format it so there are no fancy graphics.

Oftentimes a company modifies the resume to circulate it to several managers while omitting contact information. Consider sending a PDF version for security reasons and then offer to send a Word version if the company needs it (by that point you have a communication going so it is a bit less risky). Post the resume on-line if confidentiality is not an issue. Don't expect a potential employer will take the time to go there; **assume you have less than 30-seconds to make an overall impression**.

Remember the K.I.S.S. principle. If a potential employer needs a special document or additional information, volunteer to have it in his/her hand within a day or two. That demonstrates your interest, talents and sense of urgency.

Another turnoff in addition to the "me" focus, is telling the reader how you are responsible for measurable results when your role is part of a team effort. Again this comes from bad advice which says, be as specific as possible to justify your worth. Taking that literally results in contrived statements which immediately engender a "so what" reaction.

Done well, a resume "sells" you by leading the reader to the conclusion you are "the real thing." You build that by telling the right factual stories and by not adding irrelevant embellishments. Judy