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EMPLOYMENT
Crafting a resume that will grab recruiters

Some old rules no longer apply. Creativity can help, but going too far can ruin your chances for a job.

By Tiffany Hsu
March 29, 2009

Even in choppy waters, recruiters are still angling for the perfect job candidate.

But employers don't have the time or resources to sift through all the applications churned up by the recession.

California's unemployment rate hit 10.5% in February -- the highest in nearly 26 years - while the national rate stands at 8.1%.

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To boost your chances of getting plucked, you'll need a top-notch resume. That means one that combines eye-catching details and a fast, modern pitch with old-school basics, including impeccable grammar and spelling.

Today's successful resumes are marketing tools, not encyclopedia entries. They're capable of selling your story on paper or online.

Here's how to get a recruiter to fall for your resume, hook, line and sinker.

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Be a profit center

In these tough times, many companies are concerned with just staying afloat. Show how you can boost revenue, increase productivity or cut costs for your prospective employer.

"Focus on accomplishments, not responsibilities," said Doug Hardy, a resume expert for job search website Monster. "Look for numbers and put them up high."

Mention how, as a purchasing agent, you sought out bargains and negotiated millions of dollars of savings on supplies. Or show how, as a sales manager, you were responsible for 80 employees and helped double their sales figures in just two months. Even busboys and bank tellers can demonstrate how they boosted efficiency.

Remember to quantify the results. Dollar amounts are the most effective, followed by

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time saved, then percentages, Hardy said. Employers often search resume databases for candidates who "saved 20%" or "increased revenue \$100,000."

But don't act like a hot shot and list your salary demands right off the bat. Unless you're Manny Ramirez, you're likely to turn off employers in the current environment if you appear pricey and inflexible.

Go digital

Many employment applications now consist of online forms. But that's just the first round. If you hope to be seriously considered later, have a resume handy. And be prepared to send it digitally.

More employers are using computers to scan resumes for certain keywords and phrases before any human recruiter sees them. The trick is figuring out the code. Here's one strategy: Browse job search engines such as Monster.com, Indeed.com or CareerBuilder.com (which is part-owned by Tribune Co., the parent of the Los Angeles Times) and search for positions that match your skills. See what terms employers are using and start using those in your resume.

Go easy on the italics, bold lettering and underlining. Keep the font simple. Minimize graphics and colors. It will make the resume easier to read and download.

"Don't cutesy it up," said Robyn L. Feldberg, president of the National Resume Writers' Assn. "Clip art and photos in general look tacky."

Some recruiters now read resumes on smart phones, devices that can send e-mail and browse the Internet. Send a trial copy to a friend's BlackBerry or iPhone to see how it looks.

"Sometimes, a bullet point comes across as a question mark -- not quite the brilliant first impression you were trying to make," she said.

Develop a permanent online home for your credentials. The networking site LinkedIn lets you create a personal profile where you can list your education, professional experience and skills. When you share your contacts with someone, that person in effect has access to your electronic resume.

Sites such as LinkedIn can put you on the radar of prospective employers, who increasingly are using online tools to hunt for qualified candidates.

But be warned: Companies trawl sites such as Facebook and MySpace to verify the backgrounds of prospects. You'd be wise to yank those online pictures you posted of yourself drunk in the hot tub while you're job hunting.

Be (a little) creative

Creativity counts when you're looking for work. Graphic designers have screened their resumes onto T-shirts. One recent applicant scored a manager position with a Manhattan accounting firm after wearing a sandwich board inscribed with "Experienced MIT Grad for Hire."

If you're applying to a smaller, local company, show your enthusiasm by going into the office and handing the resume directly to the recruiter. Who knows -- if you're likable enough, you might be offered an interview on the spot.

But there's a fine line between self-expression and self-destruction.

Skip the smiley faces, exclamation points and pink, scented resume paper -- only Elle Woods of "Legally Blonde" fame can pull that off.

And beware the video resume. Less than a quarter of executives said their companies accepted them.

And consider the cautionary tale of Aleksey Vayner. The Yale senior constructed a video resume a few years back, replete with clips of his weightlifting prowess, fancy dance moves and bizarre ramblings about what it takes to succeed.

Some snickering investment banker e-mailed it to friends. It ended up on YouTube, where it promptly went viral. National publications picked up the story, completing Vayner's humiliation.

Get to the point

Many recruiters narrow the field after just a cursory scan of your resume.

"An employer is going to form a first impression in 30 seconds or less," Hardy said. "The only purpose of the top of the resume is to get them to read down to the end."

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Be concise. Keep the document to one page and leave the most relevant, impressive information at the top. Avoid a too-detailed list of job experience, and cut out that waitress position you held for three months in college.

Leave plenty of white space. Employers aren't going to bother reading a resume so jammed that it requires a magnifying glass.

Laura DeCarlo, president of Career Directors International, recommends a "summary" early on of concrete skills, such as budgeting or supervision.

Florid prose is likely to irritate recruiters rather than impress them. And skip the "references are available upon request" boilerplate. Employers assume you'll provide them.

Customize

A targeted resume that demonstrates your understanding of the company and the specific requirements of the job will do better than a slightly rehashed version of a decades-old document.

"It's a fatal flaw when people leave their resumes generic," Feldberg said. "The hiring manager can't figure out what kind of job they want, and the candidate can't present themselves as the solution to that employer's problems."

Never lie on your resume; recruiters are increasingly vigilant about confirming credentials. But you can tidy up flaws in your work history.

Start by shaking up the format of your resume. The traditional method of listing your work history in reverse chronological order is becoming passe, experts said.

A "functional" resume might be best for someone switching careers or trying to hide gaps in employment. Instead of a timeline, this format focuses on skills and experiences, showcasing a candidate's range of abilities.

Meanwhile, keep your skills current. That item about your Microsoft Word proficiency might have been impressive 15 years ago, but highlighting it today makes you look dated.

Consider a short section on special interests. Candidates for sales positions can show competitiveness by running marathons, while mechanical engineer hopefuls can prove their aptitude by building computers for fun, Feldberg said.

"Employers don't care if you garden or like to spend time with your family," she said. "But mention a hobby if it pertains in some way to the job, or if it's so interesting that it could be a conversation starter."

It's illegal for prospective employers to ask your age, marital status, sexual orientation, religion or political affiliation. So don't volunteer it.

Loose ends

Typos can be lethal to a resume. More than 75% of employers bounce applicants if their resumes contain spelling errors or are grammatically sloppy, according to the Society for Human Resource Management. So run a spelling check, and then ask others to proofread your resume.

If you're still employed, don't include your work e-mail or work number. You could lose the job you have.

Use your personal e-mail and cellphone instead. But keep them professional. Your bunnyboo@gottagetajob.com account doesn't belong on your resume. And when prospective employers call your mobile or home phone, make sure they don't get a voice mail recording of your kids or that ear-splitting jam from Fall Out Boy.

After all, the only horn your resume should be tooting is your own. Just make sure it's playing a song that recruiters want to hear.

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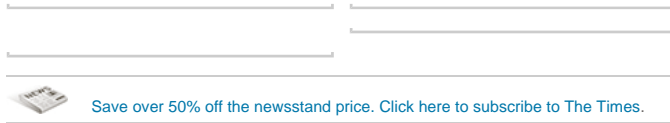
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