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Six Critical Rules of Resume Writing

Make a memorable impression with an attractive, results-oriented marketing document
by *Wendy S. Enelow*

Fred Runyan didn't want to be left holding the bag when the Northern California-based management consulting firm he worked for completed a pending merger. After 10 years with the firm, the senior consultant knew there would be big staffing changes ahead, and decided to explore opportunities elsewhere.

He needed a resume, though, so he shuffled through his desk to find the one he'd used to land his current job. He thought a few paragraphs about his decade-worth of consulting assignments would update it sufficiently, so he jotted them down. Next, he dug up a resume he'd received six years ago that had an attractive format.

He handed the revisions and original copy to his secretary and asked her to make the finished version look like the sample. In an hour, his new resume was done and he felt ready to interview.

Six months later, Mr. Runyan was still waiting for an invitation to interview. He'd received a few phone calls from employers, but nothing more. Discouraged and confused, he didn't know why the response to his mailings was so poor. He had worked for good companies, held responsible management positions and delivered strong results. Couldn't prospective employers see that when they reviewed his resume?

Apparently not. By not thoughtfully redrafting his document, Mr. Runyan failed to address key issues of resume-writing, according to members of the Professional Association of Resume Writers, a St. Petersburg, Fla.-based professional group. To ensure your resume makes the best possible impression, it's essential to meet six challenges regarding its presentation, format and content, say recently surveyed association members. These challenges and professionals' advice on writing a winning resume follow.

1. Presentation

Since your resume is actually a marketing document, its visual appearance is critical. To survive next to those of hundreds of equally qualified candidates, it must look sharp and dynamic. Don't have it typed on an outdated word processor and printed onto plain bond paper, as Mr. Runyax did, and don't model it after resumes from years back, says Jerry Bills, a Colorado Springs, Colo., resume writer.



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“Picking up an old resume book from the library and following suggestions or styles that have been outdated for years won’t give you a competitive advantage,” he says.

Instead, give your document an up-to-date style that attracts attention. This doesn’t mean using an italic typeface, cute logos or an outrageous paper color. Instead, be conservatively distinctive. Choose a sharp-looking typeface such as Bookman, Soutane, Krone, or Fritz, or if your font selection is limited, the more prevalent Times Roman, Helvetica or Arial typefaces.

Unless you’re seeking a position as a graphic artist, don’t put logos or artwork on your resume. However, using horizontal rules to separate sections can give it an upscale look. Your choice of paper color isn’t important, as long as it’s conservative – white, ivory or light gray.

2. Format

Format shouldn’t be your primary consideration when preparing a resume. When Mr. Runyan saw a format he liked, he tried to manipulate his information to fit it. Other job hunters make the same mistake, says Susan Higgins, a resume write with Q Resume Service in Grove City, Ohio. Many of her clients “insist on [using] a friend’s format because it worked for the friend, but [it’s a] critical mistake,” she says.

Decide on a resume format after your text is prepared. And even then, don’t try to make your information fit into someone else’s structure. Since each person’s career history, achievements and academic credentials are unique, their resume format should be as well. Review other resumes for ideas, but craft your document to “sell” only you.

Start writing without worrying about the format and concentrate on marketing yourself. It’s likely that when you’re finished, the format you should use will become obvious. You’ll just need to change headings or margins, insert rules, bold or italic type or edit sections to fit your information more comfortable onto a page.

If possible, adhere to these formatting guidelines:

- Don’t expect readers to struggle through 10- to 15- line paragraphs. Substitute two or three shorter paragraphs or use bullets to offset new sentences and sections.
- Don’t overdo bold and italic type. Excessive use of either defeats the purpose of these enhancements. For example, if half the type on a page is bold, nothing will stand out.
- Use nothing smaller than 10-point type. If you want employers to review your resume, make sure they don’t need a magnifying glass!
- Don’t clutter your resume. Everything you’ve heard about “white space” is true. Let your document “breathe” so readers won’t have to struggle through it.
- Use an excellent printer. Smudged, faint, heavy or otherwise poor quality print will discourage red-eyed readers.

3. Spelling, grammar and syntax

Typographical errors signal job-search death, which may be why Mr. Runyan’s did so poorly. It contained three typographical and two syntax errors, as well as unpolished wording.



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He didn't recognize that resumes serve as your introduction to employers, and indicate the quality and caliber of work you'll produce. An imperfect document isn't acceptable.

Write your document in the active first-person tense, never the third person, and choose language that's appropriate to the type of position you're seeking. If you're a mid-level manager, don't use "Ph.D." language. If you're in line for CEO, COO or other top operating slots, use words appropriate to that level.

Proofread your resume not just once or twice, but repeatedly for typographical and wording errors. Then ask three to five others to review it, paying attention to your terminology and tone.

As Walt Schuette, a resume writer with The Village Wordsmith in Fallbrook, Calif., says, "The greatest mistake job seekers make is not reading for errors (whoops, errors)."

4. Content

Resumes aren't job descriptions. Still, you may have seen some that included such descriptions as, "This position was responsible for purchasing, logistics, materials management and distribution." Were you impressed with those?

Mr. Runyan made this mistake. For instance, under "Experience," he included descriptions of positions without mentioning the size of his past employers or his achievements. It could have been anyone's resume. He also cited every job he'd held, going back to 1968.

Listing all your past employment isn't necessary or helpful. And, if you list responsibilities, include their scope and your contributions.

"Generalizations aren't impressive," says Estelle Wiesmann, a Fort Atkinson, Wis., resume writer. "You must cite specific figures, percentages and results when describing previous accomplishments in the workplace."

To highlight your strengths, develop strong, results-driven position summaries. For instance, a logistics manager might write:

Directed the planning, staffing, budgeting and operations of a 4-site logistics and warehousing operation for this \$650 million automotive products distributor. Scope of responsibility was diverse and included all purchasing, vendor management, materials handling, inventory control, distribution planning and field delivery operations. Managed a staff of 55 through six supervisors. Controlled a \$6.5 million annually operating budget.

- Introduced continuous improvement and quality management programs throughout the organization. Results included a 25% increase in daily productivity and 63% increase in customer satisfaction.
- Spearheaded cost-reduction initiatives that reduced labor costs by 18%, overtime by 34% and material waste by 42%.
- Renegotiated key vendor contracts for a 28% reduction over previous year costs.



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Prospective employers who read this description can sense the scope and results of the manager's experience. Remember, recruiters won't read between the lines for relevant information if you don't spell it out.

And if positions you held 15, 20, or 30 years ago aren't relevant to your current career path, delete or briefly summarize them at the end. For example, "Previous professional employment includes several increasingly responsible management positions with the ABC Co. and XYZ Corp." Whether you include your dates of employment depends on your circumstances.

5. Focus

A resume doesn't work if readers can't quickly grasp who a candidate is and what he or she seeks to do, say survey respondents. For instance, it's likely that Mr. Runyan baffled readers with his objective: "Seeking a position where I can contribute to the growth of a corporation."

"With a resume full of unnecessary details, repetitive information and no summary of skills or achievements, how is an employer to know who you are?" asks Jackie Murphy, a resume writer with Accurate Professional Typists in Melbourne, Fla.

Clearly and directly state who you are, with this strategy:

Omit an objective and start with a "summary" or "career or technical profile" instead. Unlike an objective, which states what you want, a summary describes what you know and quickly grabs readers' attention. For example:

SENIOR SALES & MARKETING EXECUTIVE Building Revenues & Market Share Throughout Global Business Markets

Dynamic 15-year career leading sales, marketing and service organizations throughout the U.S., Europe and Pacific Rim. Delivered strong and sustainable revenue gains in both emerging and mature business markets. Strong sales training and team leadership skills.

A summary eliminates the need for an objective because it usually indicates the type of position a candidate seeks. And don't assume that stating your objective in a cover letter is sufficient. Cover letters and resumes must be able to stand alone.

6. Selling

A resume should be more than a list of past jobs. It should serve as a personal sales and marketing tool that attracts and impresses employers. Your qualifications, words, format and presentation must all be packaged to sell yourself.

"Take credit for your accomplishments. Know what makes you marketable and sell it," advised Mark Berkowitz with Career Development Resources in Yorktown Heights, N.Y.

Ironically, sales and marketing professionals often write the worst resumes, say career counselors. That's because when they become the "product," they seem to forget everything they know about selling.



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Your resume is your only opportunity to distinguish yourself among the crowd of other candidates. You must market your qualifications aggressively by highlighting your achievements and defining the scope of your responsibilities. That means not just saying what you did but also how well you did it.

Poor example:

- Managed sales regions throughout the U.S. with 82 sales associates.
- Met all company sales goals and profit objectives.

Good example:

- Independently planned and directed a team of 82 sales associates marketing sophisticated technology products throughout the northeastern U.S.
- Launched a series of customer-driven marketing programs to expand market penetration and increase key account base. Closed 1995 at 182% of revenue goal and 143% of profit objective.

Poor example:

- Managed all financial, accounting, budgeting, MIS and administrative functions.
- Updated computer technology

Good example:

- Chief Financial Officer with full responsibility for the strategic planning, development and leadership of the entire corporate finance organization for this \$280 million consumer products manufacturer. Directed financial planning analysis, accounting, tax, treasury, budgeting, MIS and administrative functions through a 12-person management team.
- Launched the introduction of PC-based client server technology to expand MIS operations throughout the finance function. Resulted in a measurable improvement in data accuracy and long-range planning.

To create impressive descriptions, ask yourself not only what you did but how well you did it. Then sell your achievements, not your responsibilities. When Mr. Runyan went back to the drawing board, preparing his resume took three weeks instead of an hour. The process involved his secretary, two friends and three professional colleagues. His new document includes a strong, accomplishments-oriented text and makes a sharp visual presentation.

Two weeks and 100 resumes later, his phone started to ring. In one day, he had spoken with five employers and scheduled more than 10 interviews. By remembering these six rules, your resume can help you to do the same.



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DON'T BE COY ABOUT YOUR W-2 FORM

Q--I've worked with some executive recruiters who said they needed a copy of my W-2 form, but I am reluctant to show it to them because I feel it's confidential and revealing it decreases my salary negotiating strength. Should this information be shared?

A--Executive search consultants must present the best possible candidates to their clients. To do that, they must have accurate information about the people they are presenting.

According to Robert Mayer, vice president of Kennedy & Co., a Chicago-based executive search firm, tax returns are personal, but a W-2 form shows all pertinent income that affects an offer. What a W-2 shows is more complete than a check stub because it includes bonuses and extraneous taxable benefits (club dues, car expenses, etc.). When negotiating pay, all benefits and salary have to be considered.

Holding back your W-2 tells your recruiters that you're not being honest about your income level.

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Counteroffer Acceptance

Road to Career Ruin

by Paul Hawkinson

Matthew Henry, the 17th-century writer said, "Many a dangerous temptation comes to us in fine gay colours that are but skin deep." The same can be said for counteroffers, those magnetic enticements designed to lure you back into the nest after you've decided it's time to fly away.

The litany of horror stories I've come across in my years as an executive recruiter, consultant and publisher, provides a litmus test that clearly indicates counteroffers should never be accepted...EVER!

I define a counteroffer simply as an inducement from your current employer to get you to stay after you've announced your intention to take another job. We're not talking about those instances when you receive an offer but don't tell your boss. Nor are we discussing offers that you never intended to take, yet tell your employer about anyway as a "they-want-me-but-I'm-staying-with-you" ploy.

These are merely astute positioning tactics you may choose to use to reinforce your worth by letting your boss know you have other options. Mention of a true offer, however, carries an actual threat to quit.

Interviews with employers who make counteroffers, and employees who accept them, have shown that as tempting as they may be, acceptance may cause career suicide. During the past 20 years, I've seen only isolated incidents in which an accepted counteroffer has benefited the employee. Consider the problem in its proper perspective.



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What really goes through a boss's mind when someone quits?

- "This couldn't happen at a worse time."
- "This is one of my best people. If I let him quit now, it'll wreak havoc on the morale of the department."
- "I've already got one opening in my department. I don't need another right now."
- "I'm working as hard as I can, and I don't need to do his work, too."
- "If I lose another good employee, the company might decide to 'lose' me, too."
- "My review is coming up and this will make me look bad."
- "Maybe I can keep him on until I find a suitable replacement."

What will the boss say to keep you in the nest? Some of these comments are common.

- "I'm really shocked. I thought you were as happy with us as we are with you. Let's discuss it before you make your final decision."
- "Aw gee, I've been meaning to tell you about the great plans we have for you. But they have been confidential until now."
- "The V.P. has you in mind for some exciting and expanding responsibilities."
- "Your raise was scheduled to go into effect next quarter but we'll make it effective immediately."
- "You're going to work for who?"

Let's face it. When someone quits, it's a direct reflection on the boss. Unless you're really incompetent or a destructive thorn in his side, the boss might look bad by "allowing" you to go. His gut reaction is to do what has to be done to keep you from leaving until he's ready. That's human nature.

Unfortunately, it's also human nature to want to stay unless your work life is abject misery. Career changes, like all ventures into the unknown, are tough. That's why bosses know they can usually keep you around by pressing the right buttons.

Before you succumb to a tempting counteroffer, consider these universal employment truths:

- Any situation in which an employee is forced to get an outside offer before the present employer will suggest a raise, promotion or better working conditions, is suspect.
- No matter what the company says when making its counteroffer, you'll always be considered a fidelity risk. Having once demonstrated your lack of loyalty (for whatever reason), you'll lose your status as a "team player" and your place in the inner circle.
- Counteroffers are usually nothing more than stall devices to give your employer time to replace you.
- Your reasons for wanting to leave still exist. Conditions are just made a bit more tolerable in the short term because of the raise, promotion or promises made to keep you.
- Counteroffers are only made in response to a threat to quit. Will you have to solicit an offer and threaten to quit every time you deserve better working conditions?
- Decent and well-managed companies don't make counteroffers...EVER! Their policies are fair and equitable. They won't be subjected to "counteroffer coercion" or what they perceive as blackmail.

If the urge to accept a counteroffer hits you, continue to clean out your desk as you count your blessings.



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How to Ruin an Interview with an Executive Recruiter

Five sure steps that will take you out of the running

by Mark Fierle

What do you do when a recruiter calls? If you ever get a call from an Executive Recruiter – take it! How you handle the ensuing call could greatly energize your career prospects. If the recruiter has an assignment where your background could have some possibilities, you might get an interview.

Here are five great ways to **defeat** this important process:

1. Be blasé about the meeting. After all, this is not a job interview – it's okay to go in dressed less than your best, slouch during your meeting, and be sure to say, "I would never say that during a 'real' job interview."

A more realistic approach is to consider that this is a 'real' interview. Dress your best, come prepared including a clean copy of your resume and use good posture and diction. Generally, recruiters are working on un-advertised positions that are 'prime' in nature, and great next steps for a career oriented candidate. How you "come across" to the recruiter may have a great influence on your career prospects. It can be through this assignment, future assignments the recruiter works on, or referral of you to his recruiter colleagues.

2. Be defensive or unprepared when asked a question. A top notch Executive Recruiter generally asks pointed, direct questions to ascertain your skills and accomplishments. A great way to be sure they don't find out about the real you is to evade the question or tell them to refer to your resume. After all, it took you 2 hours to prepare it and it's all there!

A far saner position is to answer a question in a clear, concise manner and follow up with a question like, "Have I made myself clear on that now or would you like me to go on?" Never, never, refer to your resume other than to use as a reference tool. This approach requires a great deal of personal preparation starting with an inventory of your skills and a list of things you have done, during your career, of which you are most proud.

3. Don't hesitate to fudge on your resume. After all, it's common knowledge that everyone does. Some good way to do this are: Show you have an advanced degree (even though you never finished your thesis); take full credit for those accomplishments even though you were only part of the team; or be liberal with employment dates.

Keep in mind that it is a no-no to exaggerate on your resume and could even be cause for job termination later on down the line. Tell it like it is. Be conservative rather than liberal. Resumes are marketing tools, and you must be able to back up what it says to enhance your credibility. It is also an excellent idea to get professional counseling on preparation of this marketing tool.



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4. What do you got – I can do that! After all, I need a job and the Executive Recruiter wants to fill it. Just tell him to get you the interview and you'll do the rest.

Rule #1: Be focused on what you do best, and don't be too nose! Executive Recruiters work on a pre-qualifying as well as confidential basis – with both client company and candidate. Generally he will not identify either the client company or the candidate until he is sure there is a good match. Be patient, you will find out all the details when and if the time is right.

5. Don't be realistic about your salary, next job title, and responsibility requirements. After all, don't we want the most money, best job title, and responsibilities? Does it really matter that the money you require is well above what a superstar with a proven track record could generally command?

Don't take the chance of blowing yourself out of the water by not being realistic. If your background and skills warrant the money, title, and responsibility – you will get it. It is in everybody's best interest. If you are unrealistic, the recruiter could legitimately question your judgement.

Experienced recruiters can be an invaluable resource for a candidate – but first they have to be sold on you. Your credibility says a lot for them with their client companies. Generally the recruiter is very knowledgeable of the industry/discipline he works. On a month to month basis, they may evaluate and prioritize from any number of candidates with similar skills, experience, education, and references. It's up to them to determine which candidates get to meet with their client.

How you present yourself will determine their interest.

Mark Fierle Prior to his career in executive search he was CEO of a large Service Company. President of two National Trade Associations, and Treasury Executive in two Fortune 50 companies and an International Trading Company. He acquired a bachelor's degree in Business Administration from Gannon University in Erie, Pennsylvania.

