

Cover Letter Success is All About Specifics

by Katharine Hansen

You've heard the adage in real estate and retailing that success centers on three things: location, location, location. With cover letters, success is also tied to three things: specifics, specifics, specifics.

In our roles as resume and cover letter writers, we often get requests from customers that go something like this: "Just give me a general cover letter that I can use for any kind of job." Sorry. No can do. Well, we can do it, but we certainly don't recommend it. A cover letter needs to be specific in every way. Otherwise, it's a fairly pointless document. Some experts say even a resume should be specifically tailored for each job. While we feel that a degree of resume tailoring is sometimes desirable, extensive tailoring is unnecessary if you're specific with your cover letter.

Among the many ways you should make each cover letter quite specific are:

Specific Recipient: A cover letter *must* be addressed to the specific name of the recipient. It's not always easy to find the name of the specific hiring manager, but try to do so if at all possible. Usually, you can just call the company and ask who the hiring manager is for a given position. The worst-case scenario is that your letter will begin "Dear Hiring Manager for [name of position]." Your letter should *not* begin: "Dear Sir or Madam" or, worst of all, "To Whom It May Concern." That lazy approach shows the employer that *you* were not concerned enough to find out whom your letter does concern.

Specific Position: An effective cover letter must target a specific position, which should be mentioned in the first paragraph. If you're answering an ad, it's easy to target your letter to a specific job. But if you're making cold contacts to employers, you'll have to do some research to find out what positions that the company offers fit your qualifications. Don't list several possible positions or say that you're willing to consider any position. If you do, the employer will see you as unfocused or even desperate.

Specific Skills/Qualifications: It's perfectly okay if some parts of your letter are the same from cover letter to cover letter. But you need to be very specific when describing your skills and qualifications. Determine the skills and experiences that *specifically* qualify you for the job you're applying for, and describe those in your letter. Following are example paragraphs from a photographer looking to transition into a sales career. Both letters are for account-executive positions, but the letter writer stresses slightly different skills in each letter based on the qualifications listed in the ads to which she is responding:

The exceptional organizational abilities and detail orientation I deployed to set up photo shoots are directly applicable to the skills needed to plan and coordinate events. With great profitability, I can prospect new business opportunities, strategize communication initiatives, successfully manage client relationships, give presentations, and much more.

My experience in the client-service end of the photography business has ingrained in me the importance of establishing solid relationships built on excellent service. With great profitability, I can prospect new accounts, provide the required excellent level of service, successfully build an account base, close deals, retain customers, and much more.

Specific Examples: Whenever possible, don't just offer unsubstantiated value judgments about yourself; use concrete examples to demonstrate your claims about yourself. Example:

I demonstrated my strategic ability when I successfully developed a direct corporate sales program and a corporate affinity program for ToyVillage.com.

Specific company knowledge: Demonstrating knowledge of the employer to which you are writing is not a mandatory part of a cover letter, but it's a great touch that will often win favor in the eye of the employer. On one level, you can write something that *sounds* specific to the company you're writing to but that really can be said to any employer:

I am intensely interested in contributing my skills and experience to your firm because of your company's reputation for quality.

On a higher level, however, you can do your homework and write something that truly is specific to the company you're writing to:

Over the last two years I have followed the unfolding events at Guffman Enterprises with great interest as the firm moved into financial and broadband services.

Specific tailoring to a want ad: If you're answering an ad, the specifics of your cover letter should be tied as closely as possible to the actual wording of the ad you're responding to. I've had students express concern that it's plagiarism to use the words of an ad in one's cover letter, but here's a case where using someone else's words is a plus rather than a minus. In his new book, *Don't Send a Resume*, Jeffrey Fox calls the best letters written in response to want ads "Boomerang letters" because they "fly the want ad words -- the copy -- back to the writer of the ad." In employing what Fox calls "a compelling sales technique," he advises letter writers to: "Flatter the person who wrote the ad with your response letter. Echo the author's words and intent. Your letter should be a mirror of the ad." Fox notes that when the recipient reads such a letter, the thought process will be: "This person seems to fit the description. This person gets it."

A particularly effective way to deploy the specifics of a want ad to your advantage is to use a two-column format in which you quote in the left-hand column specific qualifications that come right from the employer's want ad and in the right-hand column, your attributes that meet those qualifications. The two-column format is extremely effective when you possess all the qualifications for a job, but it can even sell you when you are lacking one or more qualification. The format so clearly demonstrates that you are qualified in so many areas that the employer may be willing to overlook the areas in which you lack the exact qualifications. See a [sample letter in a two-column format](#).

Specific benefit to employer: "The purpose of a cover letter is to explain how you (the candidate) will benefit me (the company)." Your letter should tell very specifically how you will meet the employer's needs, solve the employer's problems, or otherwise benefit the hiring company. For example:

When I interviewed Ms. Kirkwood six months ago to obtain information about a career in real estate, she mentioned that the agency would like to establish a Web presence. I'd like to combine my interest in real estate with my knowledge of Web page design and HTML programming to help you create a Webmaster position in your office. I've even sketched out some preliminary ideas on what your Web page might look like, and I'd love to get together and show them to you.

Specific request for action and specific description of your planned follow-up action: Don't be vague about your desire to be interviewed. Come right out and ask for an interview. Then, take your specific action a step farther and tell the recipient that you will contact him or her in a specified period of time to arrange an interview appointment. Obviously, if you say you will follow up, you have to do so. If you take this proactive approach and follow up, you will be much more likely to get interviews than if you did not follow up. This follow-up aspect is another good reason to obtain the specific name of the hiring manager. Here's a sample closing paragraph requesting specific action and describing the writer's planned follow-up.

I would like to be considered for a sales position in which someone of my background could make a contribution. I will contact you soon to arrange for an interview. Should you require any additional information, I can be contacted at the phone numbers listed above.