Cover Letter Basics

The Basics of a Dynamic Cover Letter

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What is a cover letter? Also known as a letter of introduction, letter of application, transmittal letter, or broadcast letter, it's a letter that no smart job-seeker should send his or her resume without. Few employers seriously consider a resume that is not accompanied by a cover letter; thus, a dynamically written cover letter needs to be part of your job-search strategy.

Why is a cover letter so important? A resume is useless to an employer if he or she doesn't know what kind of work you want to do. A cover letter tells the employer the type of position you're seeking -- and exactly how you are qualified for that position.

A cover letter highlights the aspects of your experience that are most useful to the potential employer, and you can earn points for knowing what those aspects are. Employers get hundreds of resumes, especially when they advertise a choice position. Employers are also very busy. Often the person screening resumes skims each for only a few seconds. Your cover letter can call attention to the skills, talents, and experience the employer is looking for.

Your letter can explain things that your resume can't. If you have large gaps in your employment history or you are reentering the job market or changing the focus of your career, a cover letter can explain these circumstances in a positive way.

A cover letter can serve the same function as the "job objective" on your resume, and expand upon it. Some applicants are reluctant to limit themselves by putting an objective on their resume. Although it is best for a job-seeker to target the type of work desired as specifically as possible, you may be open to more than one option.

Finally, a cover letter is a little window into your personality. A good cover letter can suggest to an employer, "I'd like to interview this person; she sounds like someone I'd like to get to know better. This seems like just the kind of dynamic person this company needs."

Three Kinds of Cover Letters

There are roughly three kinds of cover letters, each corresponding to a different method of job-hunting. Most successful job-seekers will find that they do not employ any one method or use any one kind of cover letter, but rather a combination of all three. To understand the three kinds of cover letters, it is helpful to look at these three types of job searches.

Only about one-fifth of the job market is what we call "open." That means that only about 20 percent of job openings are ever publicly known. The main avenue for informing the public about these openings is through want ads in the newspaper, trade magazines, and other publications as well as job posting ads on various Web sites. Employment agencies and executive-search firms are another source of open-market positions. The first kind of cover letter is the invited letter, which is generally a response to a want ad.
The invited cover letter enables you to speak to the requirements of the ad. You can offer the employer the requirements sought because you know the requirements sought; it's all spelled out in the ad.

The other fourth-fifths of the market is "closed," meaning you can't find out about the positions unless you dig. That digging most often takes the form of compiling a list of all the companies in your field that you might be interested in working for and contacting them to ask for an interview. Obviously, that means some job-seekers will send out a great many resumes, accompanied by the type of cover letter that we call the uninvited or cold-contact letter, sometimes blanketing a given field of companies with direct-mail packages. This job-search tool can be very effective, especially if you have a specific set of companies you wish to work for or are looking to work in a specific geographic location.

The uninvited cover letter enables you to take a proactive approach to job-hunting instead of the reactive approach, in which you merely answer ads. It can be a great tool for uncovering hidden jobs where supposedly no openings exist. Your letter can make such an impression that you'll be remembered as soon as a vacancy opens up. You may also be able to create an opening for yourself by convincing the employer that the company needs someone with your talents. At the very least, you may obtain an interview in which the employer can refer you to others in the field who might have use for you.

Whenever possible, any cover letter should be sent to a named individual, and with the uninvited letter, this advice is especially true. The largest employer in Central Florida, for instance, throws away any letter that does not address him by name. If you want to get an interview and hence a job, you can forget about using such salutations as "Dear Sir or Madam," "Gentlemen," "Dear Human Resources Director," or "To Whom it May Concern." Those salutations tell the employer that you were not concerned enough to find out whom it concerns.

The uninvited cover letter can come about from a variety of sources. You might talk with someone at a meeting of a trade association in your field who will tell you of an opening she knows of. An acquaintance at a party might tell you of someone he knows whose company could use an employee with your experience. A friend might tell you about a job she saw through her company's internal job-posting.

Referral letters are the product of networking, which many experts say is the most effective method of job-hunting. In its simplest form, networking involves using everyone you know as a resource to finding a new job.

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The value of the referral letter is in its name-dropping. If you can grab the potential employer's attention by mentioning someone he knows and respects in the first line of the letter, you will have gained a terrific advantage over the competition. Some variations on the referral letter include approaches like these:

"John Ross of Technology Unlimited suggested you might have openings for systems analysts."

"I met with Mary Jones last week, and she mentioned that you might have need for someone with a background in book marketing."

"My adviser, Claude Brachfeld, never misses an opportunity to tell me of your innovations in the superconductivity field."

It would be a rare employer who would fail to interview an applicant with such an edge.