



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

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Are Cover Letters A Waste of Time?

by John West Hadley

I recently joined a friend who for many years ran a successful staffing firm, to do a presentation at a professional services group for several dozen unemployed people. My friend was covering résumés, and I was to tackle cover letters. As he finished, he said that in his experience, cover letters weren't worth much, but that if you were going to write one, I would explain how to put together a good one.

This is a common misconception—that cover letters aren't worth the time spent to prepare them. After all, who bothers to read them? Even the term “cover letter” makes it sound like something superfluous, a wrapper to be torn off to get at what's inside. And if you approach your cover letters that way, then yes, they **ARE** a waste of time!

On the other hand, if you approach it as a Marketing Letter, it can be a powerful weapon in your arsenal. Sure, not everyone will bother to read a cover letter, but **I can guarantee they notice whether or not there is one included with your résumé or brochure!** And since the cover letter will become a part of your file, often shared with all of the people with whom you will meet, a powerfully written letter will have much more impact than it might appear on the surface.

Think of the marketing pieces you've received in the mail. What's your opinion of a brochure that arrives with no letter, just stuck in an envelope by itself? Doesn't it look like a mass mailing on which the sender has expended no effort? Unless the cover of the brochure jumps out and gets my attention, it's going straight into the circular file.

What about a brochure that arrives with a very generic or poorly written cover letter? That's almost worse, isn't it? Now even if the brochure is well-done, I'm likely to conclude that it was prepared professionally, and the

letter is the true example of the (poor) quality of the sender's work. Now I'm wondering if he / she is capable of the level of quality service I seek.

Now what is your reaction if the brochure is accompanied by a compelling, persuasive, personalized letter? Aren't you much more likely to be interested in the sender's services? Aren't you starting to draw the conclusion that the sender is a true professional, who really cares about doing business with you? Someone who actually put some effort into this mailing?

And think about what other signals are being sent to a prospective employer or potential client via a high quality letter. A carefully crafted, persuasive letter suggests someone who pays real attention to their work. It gives some indication of the potential quality of the work product they are capable of producing.

One final scenario: What if all that is in the envelope is that compelling, persuasive, personalized letter and no brochure at all? When you open the envelope and see a brochure, you immediately think the purpose is to sell you something. Without the brochure, aren't you that much more likely to at least scan the letter? If I'm a hiring manager, and a letter arrives with a résumé attached, it's very likely that I (or my administrative assistant, who has instructions to screen out résumés), will just mark it “Human Resources” and forward it on.

Obviously, if you are writing to apply for a specific job, you have no choice but to include your résumé to be considered. In other situations, I believe that the strongest possible approach is a powerful letter with no résumé attached.

So, from now on don't waste your time writing cover letters, invest it in preparing persuasive marketing letters! □



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**A carefully
crafted, persuasive
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their work.**
