Cover Letters Get You In the Door, So Be Sure Not to Dash Them Off

EAGER TO SNARE a hot job opening, you quickly scribble a cover letter and attach it to your flawless résumé.

Too bad. You probably just blew your chance to be hired. Your hastily written missive missed the mark—and you misspelled the target company’s name.

A great cover letter is the golden key to any job search. Yet despite a glut of advice books and Web sites, an estimated 85% of cover letters are so flawed that senders never land an interview, career coaches say. Even experts err. An “ideal” letter sent to me by one career counselor contained this sentence fragment in the first paragraph: “With a great deal of interest.”

Looking elsewhere for how to craft a compelling cover letter, I turned to Lisa Jacobson, a frustrated small-business owner, and Deborah J. Storz, a marketing specialist whom she hired last spring. Their sage advice may be worth heeding as the employment rebound gathers speed.

Ms. Jacobson and her colleagues have reviewed several hundred thousand cover letters since she founded InSpireca, a New York high-school and college tutoring concern, in 1983. Not even 1% of those letters were acceptable. If InSpireca tossed every cover letter “that had something wrong with it, we would have virtually no one to choose from,” the 45-year-old chief executive complains. Her 150-employee firm brings aboard about 20 staff members a year.

IN MARCH 2003, Ms. Jacobson advertised for a part-time, experienced marketing manager. “One person department, work directly with CEO,” read the blind newspaper ad, which also requested a cover letter. Roughly 100 of the 150 job seekers sent letters. Two-thirds contained mistakes (including a misspelled current job title). Fifteen applicants addressed the female CEO as “Dear Sir.”

Equally distressing, a mere six cover letters specifically addressed qualifications listed in the ad. And only three piped Ms. Jacobson’s interest enough to read the senders’ résumés.

Ms. Storz, a veteran marketing consultant, wrote the best letter. “It referenced the job and what she was going to do to make my company better,” Ms. Jacobson recollects. “She seemed like the perfect person for the job.”

Ms. Storz’s breezy but enthusiastic letter offered detailed examples of her entrepreneurial marketing experience. She tempered her bravado with humor. “I’ve always been a sort of ‘one-man band’ (albeit of the feminine persuasion) and in these lean economic times, I’m finding that really comes in handy,” she wrote.

Though a newcomer to the educational-service industry, Ms. Storz concluded her four-paragraph note with the tantalizing comment that she had numerous related marketing ideas. “Wow!” Ms. Jacobson remembers thinking. “She’s already working for InSpireca.”

Dropping an intriguing thought near the end of a cover letter entices hiring managers “to follow up with you to find out more,” Ms. Storz believes. However, she has discovered the tactic doesn’t work unless you establish your credibility higher up with a well-pitched summary of your relevant credentials and love for this particular company.

MS. STORZ SAYS her cover letters almost always generate job interviews. She suspects that’s because she spends a long time researching, writing and polishing them. Her InSpireca letter took her five hours. She revised it four times.

“The only chance you have to inject a little bit of personality is in the cover letter,” and a good one should “who you are, what skills you possess and what kind of communicator you are,” the 45-year-old New Yorker explains. The résumé is just the “supporting details.”

Ms. Storz makes sure that at least one individual she deeply respects reviews each cover-letter draft for typos and the proper tone. “Another pair of eyes can work wonders,” she notes.

The marketing consultant often lends her own eyes, serving as an informal cover-letter coach for job-hunting friends and relatives. Last summer, for instance, she helped her niece, Alison Hager, jump-start a stalled search.

The Georgetown University honors graduate had moved to New York in pursuit of an advertising job. But 20 potential employers ignored her inquiries about the possibility of an interview. In hindsight, Ms. Hager mainly blames the stiff, formulaic tone of those cover letters.

“I was desperate,” she says. “I needed to make over my letters.”

Ms. Storz urged her niece to inject more passion into her missives. “I never thought I could say, ‘This job would be a dream for me’”, because that “would sound hokey,” recollects Ms. Hager, who’s 23.

The revamped approach soon paid off. Badger Kry & Partners picked her to be a brand coordinator in August. “It would be a dream for me to work” for the small ad agency, Ms. Hager’s cover letter read. She now sees another reason why a lukewarm cover letter is such a dreadful idea. It speaks volumes “about how you will work professionally,” she says.

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