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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 Don't have it typed on an outdated word processor and printed onto plain bond paper, as Mr.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.

"Picking up an old resume book from the library and following suggestions or styles that have been outdated for years won't give you a competitive advantage," he says.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

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.

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.

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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