

By Sarah Needleman

Five Tips for Writing A Tailored Thank You

For job candidates seeking an edge, sending interviewers a customized thank-you is critical.

"You're helping to jog their memories of you," says Heather Hamilton, staffing-programs manager for marketing and finance at Microsoft Corp. in Redmond, Wash. Recruiters typically interview several candidates for a position, she explains, noting that in one week she might meet with 10 applicants.

Simply sending a thank-you isn't enough to stand out from the competition, adds Frank Heller, recruiting manager at Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia Inc. in New York. He estimates that 90% of the candidates he interviews make the effort, while only about half personalize their letters.

Here are five tips to help you write a tailored thank-you.

1. Proofread beyond spelling and grammar.

If you're interviewing with several employers, check that each thank-you shows the correct company and recruiter name, advises Theresa Lenczewski, a human-resources specialist for New York-based international advertising agency JWT, a unit of WPP Group PLC of London. She sometimes receives thank-yous addressed to competitors, a gaffe she says costs candidates a second interview. "The positions I recruit for involve a lot of corresponding with clients through email so paying attention to detail is very important," she explains.

2. Reiterate your best qualities.

"I've had candidates get lost in the shuffle, only to rediscover them when I received thank-you notes that restated their strong points," says Kevin A. Mercuri, associate vice president at 5W Public Relations, a New York-based agency. "A thank-you is literally the last chance candidates have to sell themselves to an employer." A candidate for a senior account-executive job once sent him a letter restating her connections with editors at trade publications that Mr. Mercuri frequently pitches. "I forgot about that and it immediately put her at the top of the list again," he says.

3. Show off your listening skills.

In 2003, a candidate for a position at ADT Security Services Inc. included a photocopied article from a trade magazine in his thank-you to Michael Esposito, then vice president of human resources for the Boca Raton, Fla.-based security-services company. "It spoke to the very issue we talked about in the interview," he says. "It told me that this person really was focused on what was going on in our conversation and that he was really serious about the opportunity."

4. Tap into the employer's culture -- but keep it professional.

Scott Barnum, president of Cocoa Pete's Chocolate Adventures, says he favors candidates who reference the food company's sense of humor in their thank-yous. He's received thank-yous with "Sweet 300" for the Campbell, Calif.-based company's address, while others mimicked Mr. Barnum's email signature, "Have a sweet day." "It's definitely a plus when candidates show they're aware of the culture," he says.

But no matter how laid-back a company appears, keep your thank-you professional, advises Bernt Ullmann, president of Phat Fashions LLC, a New York-based designer and marketer of hip-hop fashions and a unit of Kellwood Co. He's unimpressed by thank-yous with slang or funky spelling. "It comes across as contrived," he explains. "It's OK to express some individuality, maybe by choosing an artistic card, but what an employer primarily wants to see is that the candidate knows proper business etiquette."

5. Write to every executive you meet.

If you interview with more than one person at a company, send each a customized thank-you, recommends Dean Fechner, senior manager, U.S. recruiting, at Booz Allen Hamilton Inc. The McLean, Va.-based management-consulting firm hires between 70 and 100 business-school graduates annually following interviews with four senior executives. "Partners have forwarded thank-you emails from candidates that were identical to the ones they'd sent me," he says. "A letter that's not well-thought-out can only hurt you." For ideas on what to write, think back to the topics discussed during each interview. "You might say that it was really interesting to learn about a particular client," suggests Mr. Fechner.

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-- December 06, 2005