



Why Thank-You Letters Aren't Enough Anymore

By JOHN J. MARCUS

"Gee, it looks like a thank-you letter from an applicant I interviewed last week. Let's see...it says she appreciates the time I gave her, that she's confident she has the right qualifications for the position and that she's certain she'll make an immediate contribution. That's nice. And she hopes to hear from me with a positive response. Hmmm, just like every other letter I've gotten from candidates this week."

It's common courtesy for job hunters to send a thank-you letter to hiring managers after interviewing. So common, in fact, that it no longer makes much of an impact. Managers expect to receive a note, and they regard the senders merely as informed candidates who are following protocol. As a prospective employee, you gain no advantage for your effort -- you simply avoid being eliminated.

"When I don't receive a thank-you letter, I consider the applicant to be rude, unprofessional and ignorant of accepted business practices," says Cathy Layton, owner of a Sarasota, Fla., real-estate consulting firm that bears her name. "On the other hand, my receiving a letter from an applicant doesn't improve his or her chances of getting an offer. I expect to be sent a letter. It's part and parcel of job hunting nowadays."

Sound job hunting demands that you write a thank-you letter to all interviewers within 48 hours of your meetings. But to really make a great impression, your next step should be a follow-up telephone call. Without a thoughtful phone call, your letter will soon be forgotten.

First, Write a Letter

Hiring managers agree that a top-notch thank-you letter must include the following components:

- An opening paragraph in which you express your appreciation for the interview.
- A second paragraph that reinforces your understanding of the position's requirements and emphasizes your qualifications. Be sure to include any important information about yourself that you may have omitted during the interview.
- If necessary, a third paragraph to correct any misunderstanding the interviewer might have following your meeting. You can also use this paragraph to counter an objection the interviewer raised about an aspect of your background.
- A final paragraph that expresses your interest in the position and the company.

Here's an example of an effective thank-you letter:

I appreciate the time you gave me yesterday afternoon. I felt our meeting was as enjoyable as it was informative.

After thinking about your Regional Sales Manager position and the goals set for it by the home office, I'm confident

that I would be able to meet and exceed those numbers. Bill, as we discussed, I've had extensive experience building both distributor networks and direct-sales organizations in the specialty chemicals industry (as well as in others). My record has been stellar, with numerous awards and bonuses for outstanding increases in revenues and new accounts, plus the recruiting, training and development of talented and promotable sales personnel.

I consider your Regional Sales Manager position to be consistent with my plans for growth. Additionally, your company is a leader in the industry, with an outstanding reputation for rewarding top producers. In short, Bill, I think the job would be an excellent career move for me.

Thanks again for the meeting, and I look forward to hearing from you.

It's Time to Call

Five to seven days after mailing your letter, place a follow-up call with the explanation that you want to make sure the interviewer received your note.

Undoubtedly, you'll be told that your letter arrived and was read. What's important, though, is that while your competition is still hoping to hear back from the company, you're talking with the person who will make the hiring decision. This gives you the opportunity to deepen your relationship and move ahead of other applicants by engaging the manager in a stimulating conversation.

Good subjects to discuss on the phone include any aspect of the position that remain unclear. You could revisit an important issue from your interview or elaborate on a key point. You also might ask an insightful question about the job, the manager's department or the company. If you heard of a significant business development, ask about its effect on the organization.

Your objective with this call is to introduce a topic that piques the manager's interest and allows the two of you to have a meaningful conversation. Ideally, your would-be boss will suggest getting together to continue talking in person. (You can even make this suggestion yourself.) If you're able to arrange a second meeting, you'll gain an enormous advantage over other applicants.

Another particularly effective step is to expand your research efforts after your first interview, then discuss your findings with the hiring manager during the follow-up call. Briefly explain what you've learned and suggest getting together to discuss your observations and the questions raised by your research.

Mark Leavitt, an automotive-services operations manager in Boston, used this approach to schedule a second meeting with his prospective boss and eliminate his competition entirely. After an initial interview, Mr. Leavitt called his contact, John Geer, president of C. J. Resources Inc., a holding company in Lexington, Mass., with interests in real-estate development, petroleum marketing and automotive services. He initiated a conversation about the changing technologies in automotive services, and impressed Mr. Geer with his knowledge and vision. Mr. Geer arranged a second meeting, and hired Mr. Leavitt a few days later.

You can't count on all managers to schedule second appointments, but by making follow-up calls, you'll strengthen your relationship with hiring authorities and perhaps become the leading contender.

Of course, if you have another job offer in hand, your call is a good time to advise your contact of the situation. If possible, give a date by which you've promised to tell your decision to the other employer. If the hiring manager views you as the top candidate, this could expedite the company's decision making. Remember, only use this technique if you truly have another offer, since many companies don't want to rush hiring decisions and may respond by crossing you off their list.

What's Taking So Long

A hiring manager's selection decision often is subjective and based on a range of issues unrelated to your competence and background. For example:

Managers often meet with several equally qualified candidates, then have difficulty deciding which one to hire. The person who expresses the greatest desire for the job typically gets the nod in a close race, since he or she has proven the necessary enthusiasm and commitment that companies seek in new hires.

Hiring managers typically face three potential problems. The person they select could:

1. reject the offer outright
2. ask for time to consider the offer, then turn the job down
3. accept the offer but never start work after receiving a better offer elsewhere or accepting a counteroffer with a current employer.

By conveying that you view the position as an excellent career move, you'll relieve hiring managers of these concerns. They'll know that you'd accept a fair offer, which provides an additional incentive for them to select you.

Let your competition job hunt by the book. Focus on earning the offer by writing and calling the hiring manager. Other applicants will be waiting by the phone while you're building a relationship with the person who can hire you, and you'll generate many more offers as a result.

Mr. Marcus is a career counselor and resume writer in Sarasota, Fla., and author of "The Resume Doctor" (1996) and "The Complete Job Interview Handbook" (1994), both published by HarperCollins.

Email your comments to cjeditor@dowjones.com.