

WRITE A THANK-YOU LETTER THAT HELPS CLINCH AN OFFER



By John Marcus

Don't think of a thank-you letter as a thank-you letter. That's the last thing it is. Instead, view it as an interviewing tool that will increase your chances of winning the offer. If you write and send your thank-you letter immediately after the meeting, you'll reinforce the qualifications you discussed with the interviewer and rise above other applicants -- perhaps to the top of the list.

Jack Bartello was a sales manager at American Computer Inc., a Boston-based company that sold and leased new and used computer equipment. After his interview with Ed Walter, the president of CompuMart Corp., a Cambridge, Mass.-based reseller of computers, computer systems and computer boards, he immediately wrote Mr. Walter a letter.

Several days later, Mr. Walter called to say he had received Mr. Bartello's letter.

"It was the icing on the cake," he told the candidate. "I was really impressed with you during the interview, but your letter hammered home how well you understand where I want to take this company, the challenges that lie ahead, and your ability to do exactly what needs to be done." Mr. Walter offered Mr. Bartello the director of sales position, which he accepted and started shortly afterwards.

Gone With the Wind

Using a thank-you letter as a critical element of a job-search strategy is a new development. Previously, job hunters would dash off short notes thanking interviewers for their time, expressing interest in an opening and stating that they hoped to receive an offer. Writing a letter was so unimportant, in fact, that many job hunters didn't bother to do so.

But thank-you letters have become more crucial in recent years. Anything but a formality, this document must be crafted to address the key points you discussed during the interview and convincingly convey your capability for the position. It also must demonstrate your strong understanding of the company's or department's goals and needs.

It's so important to send a compelling thank-you letter that you'll jeopardize

your chances of being hired if you don't. It should be a page in length and sent within three days of your interview.

"I basically write off the person if I don't receive a letter or e-mail from them" following interviews, says Rand Manasse, president of Reference Systems Inc., a Chappaqua, N.Y.-based corporation that develops and implements software solutions. To Mr. Manasse, not sending a note demonstrates "a total lack of professionalism and business etiquette."

"And in the instance when someone writes me a letter that's so general that it could pertain to any company they've interviewed with, I'm equally turned off," he says.

Tomas Barrett, senior vice president of IMCO, an Irving, Texas-based secondary producer of aluminum, says he expects to hear from candidates following interviews. Writing a letter gives them a chance to demonstrate their communication and relationship-building skills while affirming their qualifications for the position and their interest in joining the company, he says.

"When someone doesn't contact me, they clearly lack important qualities, and I eliminate them from consideration," says Mr. Barrett.

A Tale of Two Letters

These tips can help you to convert a standard thank-you note into a high-impact letter:

Letter No. 1. Use this when you're being considered for a job that's responsible for primarily one function.

In the first paragraph, thank the interviewer for his or her time. For example, "Thank you very much for the time you spent with me this past Tuesday. I thought our discussion was as informative as it was enjoyable."

Some job hunters feel that thanking an interviewer for the meeting puts them in a subordinate light. After all, the company needs to fill a key slot, and they represent the solution to the problem. In this case, you can say something that places you on a more equal footing with the interviewer, such as, "I want to express my appreciation for the time we spent together this past Tuesday. I enjoyed meeting you, learning about your company, and hearing about your exciting plans for growth and expansion." Conclude the paragraph or, if you have a lot to say, begin a new one with a statement that shows your understanding of where the company or department wants to go.

In a new paragraph, explain that you want to reiterate key points about your background that relate to the opening. Follow this with a list of about a half-dozen accomplishments or responsibilities that demonstrate your ability to excel in the job. Precede each statement with a bullet.

In your next paragraph, sum up your capability. In the closing paragraph, restate your appreciation for the interview and then say how much you look forward to a second meeting or would like to join the company, whichever seems more appropriate.

Don't assume that expressing a strong interest in the company will result in a lower offer. Just as you want an employer to be eager about hiring you, employers want applicants to be enthusiastic about working for them. Secondly, a company's initial offer is almost always negotiable. First secure the offer, and then try to negotiate a good package.

Jack Bartello's thank-you is an [example](#) of a letter written for a position with primarily a single responsibility.

Letter No. 2. If you interviewed for a position where you would be responsible for *several* functions, your thank-you letter can use the same beginning and end described above. However, instead of providing a list of bulleted statements about your successes, write several paragraphs, with each discussing your success in a specific function. Peter Stample's note is a good [example](#) of this version.

Finishing Touches. In both letters, consider adding a paragraph that offers additional information in support of your candidacy. For example, you may want to mention or clarify an important point about your background or clear up a misconception you believe the interviewer might have had from your discussion. You also can use this paragraph to describe your management style or certain qualities that have contributed to your career success thus far.

Letter Recipients

Write a letter to each individual who interviewed you. This includes your prospective boss, representative of human resources, and any other managers you met with during your visit. There's no telling whose assessment will carry great weight, and you don't want to step on anyone's toes by excluding them. Be sure to ask for everyone's business card so that you have the correct names and titles.

In the event that you are having a panel-type interview, where you meet with several people at the same time, try to make mental notes during the session regarding the types of questions each person asked and/or their specific concerns. Your goal is to personalize each letter as much as possible.

Snail Mail or E-mail?

Which medium is best for sending thank-you letters? There's no correct answer; you must use your best judgment as to which method your interviewers would prefer.

If the interviewer relies heavily on the Internet during the business day, e-mail would be the best. You want to demonstrate that you fit the corporate culture, and sending a standard letter could be considered old-fashioned.

On the other hand, if the interviewer seldom uses the Internet, e-mail could be construed as impersonal, even rude, while a standard letter would be seen as a thoughtful personal gesture.

Carefully evaluate each interviewer to determine the role the Internet plays in that person's work life. It may be obvious or take guesswork on your part. As a rule of thumb, sending regular mail is never wrong unless the employer is steeped in technology.

The note you send interviewers after the meeting is anything but an exercise in proper etiquette. Instead, it's an opportunity to further your relationship with a potential hiring manager by reinforcing your understanding of the position and your ability to excel in the role. Your carefully crafted statements will advance your candidacy and be remembered during the rest of the hiring process.

-- Mr. Marcus is a career counselor and resume writer in Sarasota, Fla. He's the author of "The Resume Makeover: 50 Common Problems with Resumes and How to Correct Them" (McGraw-Hill Trade, 2003).