

THE RIGHT “THANK YOU” CAN LAND YOU AN OFFER

BY SINARA STULL O’DONNELL

The next call was supposed to be an offer, followed by salary negotiation. My candidate for a human-resources job had sailed through three interviews. Her four references had checked out and I’d been assured that she was the top candidate. As the executive recruiter, my income, not to mention my credibility with the client company, was at stake. The call I received instead was a first.

My candidate had followed my instructions to the letter — sort of. She’d sent a follow-up note to each person who had interviewed her.

My company contact called and told me that my candidate was out of the running. Her letters were replete with errors and she’d misspelled the name of the company on every one. My candidate didn’t get the job offer because she, the proud possessor of an MBA, had not used her spellchecker, nor had she proofread her letters.



CLOSING THE DEAL

Thank-you letters following an interview can make or break your candidacy. Your follow-up is not only a matter of courtesy and professionalism, it’s an opportunity to affirm your positive impression on hiring managers. A carefully crafted thank-you note can even re-open a door that was once closed.

David Knowles, an executive recruiter with Excel Unlimited Inc., an executive search firm in Houston, cites the example of the candidate he’d worked with who had received a “no thank you” letter from a prospective employer. The applicant wrote back. He thanked the hiring manager for his time, mentioned some items that had come up in the interview and asked to be considered for future openings. In two months, the manager called him. He’d remembered the candidate and his professionalism.

Some employers look for that “surprise” element in a candidate, according to Mr. Knowles. In many instances, employers will interview a number of candidates who have similar backgrounds. They’ll look for the one who surprises them by showing creativity or asking the right questions.



Sending an appropriate follow-up note can also give candidates this edge. “The key is showing enthusiasm and making a statement of interest in the job,” he says.

Making the right impression with a thank-you letter after an interview requires a mix of art and science. To craft an appropriate follow-up, use the following guidelines:

Send an individual follow-up letter within 24 hours of an interview to everyone with whom you’ve met.

Make sure that the letter is written on a computer (not hand-written) and is carefully proofed and spell-checked. Tom Royston, a Western regional recruiting manager for Expanets Inc., a telecommunications company in Valencia, Calif., recommends that candidates follow up on e-mail. “Everyone reads their e-mail. It’s fast, it’s efficient and it shows your computer friendliness,” he says. Hiring managers’ e-mail addresses are usually on their business cards. If not, ask his or her assistant for it as you leave.

Send a letter even if you’re working with a recruiter. You may wish to run a rough draft of your letter by your recruiter.

Mention specifics from the interview, including ways that you can add to the firm’s bottom-line; ideas for the future; and points of discussion that had arisen during the meeting. Make the letter personal. Form letters are useless and could be considered insulting.

If the interviewer asks you to call at a certain date, do so. But calling doesn’t get you off the hook in writing a follow-up letter. You still need to follow up immediately in writing. You can refer to the forthcoming call: “I look forward to speaking with you on the 26th as we discussed.”

Use the letter to clarify or amplify points that arose in the interview. “In our meeting you mentioned that you were looking for an individual who had the ability to work with all levels. In my position as a sales rep with ABC Publishing, my territory included Arizona and California. In that capacity, I called on a wide variety of clients from beauty college instructors to professors at UCLA.”

Don’t send gifts. They can make the receiver feel obligated and, in some cases, uncomfortable. Chris Remmers, a senior recruiter at Nestle USA Inc., the U.S. subsidiary of a Swiss food company in Glendale, Calif., had a candidate once send him a box of chocolates. “They were chocolates from a competitor! What did that show me? What a faux pas,” he says. Mr. Remmers also recalls with disdain the candidate who sent him a sneaker after an interview. The candidate wanted to remind Mr. Remmers, who then worked at an entertainment company, that he wanted to “get a foot in the door.” The effort backfired.

TYPES OF LETTERS

No matter how well or poorly your interview goes, you should always write a thank-you note. Generally there are three types of follow-up letters:

1. The “closer.”



You want the job. It has your name on it. The interview went well and you feel you're a contender. You may even know that the company is checking references. The closer follow-up is the icing on the cake. It's simple but, as sales pros would say, it "asks for the business."

"Ms. Hiring Manager,

"I want very much to become a part of the team. I look forward to hearing a positive response from you soon."

2. The "fix-it."

"Fix-it" letters are for correcting an impression when you feel you've been misunderstood in the interviewing process. They don't always work, but they're worth sending. Make sure your "fix-it" letter is positive and in no way criticizes the reader.

Mr. Knowles tells an instructional story about a candidate for a marketing position with a major entertainment company. She blew her interview and she knew it. Sitting in a comfortable chair, she'd become too relaxed and forgot she was in an interview. The company official casually asked why she'd majored in drama. Without thinking, she said, "I always wanted to be a newscaster." The manager later told Mr. Knowles that her answer signaled to him that she had a "hidden agenda" and that he'd lose her to the "bright lights."

Mr. Knowles advised her to send a "fix-it" letter. She wrote to the manager, saying that she realized that he may have gotten the wrong impression from her answer and she wanted to set the record straight. She told him that the newscaster idea was one she'd had as an undergraduate, but that her goals had changed. She then enumerated the reasons why she'd be an asset to the company.

The hiring manager agreed to see her for a second interview and later hired her.

3. The "no thank-you."

You may have been interested in a company and then lost interest. If you're working with executive recruiters, you need to take their lead as they are, in effect, your agents. If you've been to more than one interview, call your primary recruiter contact to inform him or her of your decision. Your letter to the hiring manager should be brief, gracious and to the point. "I appreciate the time you have afforded me during the interview process but I have decided to explore other avenues at this time." If possible, mention any particular courtesy he or she may have shown, e.g., "I especially enjoyed the tour of the plant."

You also can follow up with a phone call. But be careful of becoming the type of candidate who some recruiters refer to as "stalkers" — people who call so often that they take themselves out of the running.



FOLLOW-UP CALLS

One follow-up phone call is usually appropriate and often appreciated. Sometimes hiring managers are so busy that a quick call from a candidate helps to put the hiring process back on track. A few tips for a follow-up phone call include:

Make it short and simple.

It's OK to leave a brief message on a hiring manager's voice mail.

Be positive.

Call about five days after you've sent a follow-up letter.

Ask for the job: "I'm still very excited about the prospect of joining your team. Please let me know if there is any further information I can give you about myself."

Once you've been hired, you have a few more follow-ups. Thank-you notes should go to your recruiter and your references for giving their time during the process. Not only is it courteous, it's an opportunity to maintain your contacts.