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Best Practices in Resumes & Career Marketing Communications

by Louise Kursmark

Best Practice #1: Start with the End in Mind

Before writing a word of your resume, it is essential to form an accurate picture of “who,” “what,” and “where” you want to be in your next career role. Without a specific goal, it is virtually impossible to craft a clear, strong, and meaningful marketing document—your resume—to help you achieve that goal. And just as critically, with a clear goal you instantly have a “lens” through which you can filter all of your career, personal, and professional activities, experiences, and qualifications and include on your resume only those that are relevant and meaningful. The result is a resume that positions you appropriately, clearly showcases your expertise, and doesn’t confuse the reader.

Best Practice #2: Make It Easy on Your Readers

People don’t read resumes for enjoyment. Recruiters, HR reps, and hiring managers are looking for specific information and a promise of value. Network contacts—even your closest friends and colleagues—seek to learn enough about you so they can help you with your job search, refer you to appropriate people, and recommend you for specific opportunities. So when writing your resume, make it easy for your readers to quickly grasp key points: who you are, where you fit into an organization, and what you have done. Create a structure that allows them to easily skim through the resume to understand your career chronology and educational background. Keep your paragraphs short and break up information into easily digestible “bites” that will encourage readers to keep reading.

Best Practice #3: Sell It, Don’t Tell It

Your resume should be designed to “sell” you into your next position. Thus, it must entice your prospective “buyers”—employers—to want to know more about you and to believe that you can bring value to their organization. A great technique to accomplish this goal is to “sell” what you’ve done rather than simply “tell” it. Extensively detailing your duties and job activities is a “tell” approach. Instead, keep job descriptions to a minimum and include meaningful details through energetic accomplishment statements that “sell” how well you’ve done your job. You’ll keep your readers interested and communicate information that is unique to you and cannot be duplicated on the resumes of other candidates.

Best Practice #4: Be Specific

It is much easier for hiring authorities to recognize and appreciate your value when you provide specific details, facts, and results. Saying you “increased sales,” “boosted customer satisfaction,” “cut costs,” or “improved profitability” sounds nice, but without precise dollar, number, or percentage amounts, your resume seems vague and fuzzy. Make the effort to uncover the specific and measurable results of your

key job accomplishments. Your resume will be stronger, more credible, and much more distinctive than resumes that are full of broad, general accomplishments.

Best Practice #5: Convey Context

One of the best ways to pump up the impact and meaning of your resume is to include context details that help readers fully understand what you have accomplished. For example, “increased sales 10%” is a specific accomplishment statement, but “increased sales 10% while industry declined 20%” packs a lot more punch. Think about the challenges you faced in each job. What were you expected to do, and how did you perform? How does that compare to others in your company or in the industry? Briefly explain the context of each job and/or each challenge to give readers the background information they need to understand your achievements.

Best Practice #6: Answer the Unspoken “So What?”

Every organization in the world has a purpose. For corporations, the purpose is usually to make money (revenues and profits). In nonprofit arenas, the purpose might be to educate students, save lives, disseminate the arts, improve health and well being, or any one of a number of noble causes. Similarly, every job exists to perform particular functions and also to advance the goals of the organization. When you write your resume, look for the specific things you accomplished that are pertinent to your job and also that relate to larger goals. Show that you understand—and contributed to—the organizational mission.

Best Practice #7: Express Your Personal/Professional Brand

What makes you unique? How do you do what you do? How are you different from other candidates with similar qualifications? Delve into personal/professional branding to succinctly communicate—in your resume and all of your career marketing communications—your “unique promise of value” to future employers. Defining your brand is not a quick nor easy process, but it brings enormous benefits and keen insights to you during your job search and throughout your career. See Best Practices in Personal and Professional Branding for much more information on this timely and important topic.

Best Practice #8: Understand Resume Scanning and the Importance of Keywords

Electronic scanning and “applicant tracking systems” are commonplace in today’s world of job search. It might feel discouraging that your resume is first read by a machine, but don’t despair! You’ll maximize your chances of being found for appropriate jobs if you include in your resume all of the appropriate “keywords” for that position. Keywords are the terms that employers and recruiters use to search and screen resumes for strong candidates. Keywords might include hard skills and specific credentials along with less tangible abilities. Before submitting your resume online, scan the job description to see if your resume includes all of the right language.

You don’t need a separate keyword section on your resume—the scanners will pick up the keywords no matter where they appear—but sometimes the easiest way to modify your resume for specific jobs is to create a separate list of “core competencies” or “areas of expertise” toward the top of your resume.

And never forget that humans, not machines, do the actual hiring and your job search activities must focus on ways to put yourself in front of “live” hiring authorities. Review Best Practices in Job Search to be sure you are investing your time wisely and not relying on online submissions and electronic scanning systems as your only job search strategy.

Best Practice #9: Write Tight

Tight writing is powerful, meaningful, and energetic. It eliminates wasted words, tightens flabby language, and pares your resume to its essential core—so that readers will not get lost in a sea of meaningless words and nonessential details. Take the time to edit your resume so that it includes just what’s needed to tell your story, convey your qualifications, and communicate your value—and no more. It’s hard work, but the results are worth it!

Best Practice #10: Write Crisp, Meaningful Cover Letters

Continue to “write tight” in your cover letters! There’s no need to recap your entire career or detail all of your qualifications. Touch on a few highlights that will entice readers to your resume. Whenever possible, reference specific challenges or opportunities related to the position, the company, or the industry. Show that you know what they’re up against, what they’re trying to achieve, and how you can help.

Best Practice #11: Go Beyond the Resume

A well-written and strategically focused resume is a concise presentation of your career, your successes, and your capabilities, and it is your initial introduction to hiring authorities and networking referrals. But your resume certainly does not tell the whole story, and often it is to your advantage to create additional career marketing materials that will more fully express who you are, what you have done, and what you can do for your next employer.

For example, a one- or two-page expanded explanation of several of your most notable career achievements will help employers understand how you do what you do and differentiate you from other candidates. An online profile needs to be even more concise than a resume yet must convey essential information. A web portfolio allows you to “show” as well as “tell” the highlights of your creations and successes. An executive bio is more subtle than a resume and can be used for countless networking, public speaking, and other professional activities.

Start with the resume and expand, adapt, and create new documents as needed for your various activities and audiences during your job search and throughout your career.

Best Practice #12: Communicate a Consistent Message in All Career Marketing Communications

You’ve gone to all the time and trouble of crafting a powerful resume that clearly communicates your value and expresses your personal brand. Now take those key messages and extend them to every letter, email, beyond-the-resume document, networking introduction, and interview throughout your job search. Your clarity and consistency ensure that everyone you reach understands who you are, what you’re good at, how they can help you, and what you can do for them. Clarity and consistency constantly reinforce your messages and mean “no surprises” for employers. Clarity and consistency keep you

sharply focused on the activities, contacts, and opportunities that are the best fit, now and throughout your career.

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