

Writing a Resume for Susie the Screener

*Keep your hogwash reading low and your
correspondence won't end up in File 13*

By Douglas B. Richardson

Susie the screener is sitting at her desk in the human resources department at Megalarge Inc. when the latest batch of resumes arrives. They're in response to Megalarge's recent ad in the Daily Planet for a regional marketing manager ("Get a Life in Marketing! We need bottom-line oriented, shirtsleeves go-getters to lead us into the 21st Century...").

There are 58 resumes in this weeks Load, down from 74 last week and 109 the first week the ad ran. Susie's heart sinks. She picks up the first response and glances at the cover letter:

I was born at an early age and from that point forth I had a dream, a dream that would challenge my heart and soul...

Susie drops the letter and resume stapled thereto into the large gray wastebasket next to her desk, which bears the hand-lettered sign, "File 13: Preliminary Processing."

The second response is housed in a black vinyl window binder with the phrase: "Nomination of J. Blokes Cranston to the Position of Regional Marketing Director." Into File 13.

The third resume is headed: "Objective: I want a challenging position in a progressive company that will provide me with a career challenge, draw on my skills and experience and allow me to contribute to the goals of the company." Clink: File 13 again.

The Other Side of the Coin

Susie isn't some aberrant hard-hearted monster. She's a professional resume reader and is behaving in a way typical of the species. She's pressed for time, short on sympathy, perpetually suspicious and fully authorized to deep-six any response that bores, confuses, annoys or seeks to con her. Megalarge thinks she performs her screening function extremely well.

Among the thousands of books and articles that focus on "The One True Way to Write a Resume," there are precious few about how your resume gets read. To make sense of all these recipes and prescriptions, you first must understand the mind set of the person you want to persuade of your wondrous virtues. Susie isn't unique, she's composite of the way human nature works when confronted with a job seeker's marketing brochure.

Resume readers' responses to your efforts are governed by four major principles: 1) Address my needs and priorities, not your wishes and aspirations. 2) Don't tax my patience. 3) Don't tax my credulity. 4) Give me the information I want - and only the information I want - in a sequence that lets me make the most accurate snap judgment about you.

While it's true that a potential employer should have some concerns about your motivation and what will make you a happy camper, her primary priority is getting her needs met. She's paying the money and thinking in terms of what value the new employee brings for that money. Resumes and cover letters that carry on ad nauseum about the job hunter's needs and goals are a definite turnoff.

To start, Susie and most other resume readers say they aren't particularly fond of the heading, "Objective," much less the self-serving gibberish that often follows it. The word objective means "I want," Susie explains. "I don't care what you want. I care what I want. I'm more comfortable with a 'Profile' or a 'Summary' that describes in matter-of-fact terms your level of experience or responsibility, the roles and functions you claim to be able to perform and the setting in which you've worked." For example:

Profile: Sixteen years of intellectual property, trademark and patent law experience with a Fortune 100 multinational chemical manufacturer, preceded by four years of large business-law experience. Proven expertise in:

- *Patent prosecutions and applications*
- *Technology transfer of biochemical processes/products*
- *Management of the corporate legal function*
- *Litigation management of trademark/intellectual property and patent infringement cases*

Susie also notes that if there's nothing atop the resume that serves as a product description and you simply jump right into "Professional Experience," she naturally will assume that you want to continue doing exactly what you did in your last job. After all, it stands to reason that your most recent job represents your highest level of competency in your field thus far.

If you're redirecting or recasting your career direction or product profile, you've got to give readers a frame of reference before they get into the meat of the resume. Provide an objective statement, since the natural question readers will ask is, "Why do you want to do that, anyway?" Susie adds that she tends to screen out career changers' resumes pronto: "Career changers are risky and unproven. I play it safe." That's why career changers seldom find jobs through ads, no matter how artful their resumes.

Give Me a Break

During Susie's first rip through the resume stack, she doesn't actually read them. She scans them at hyperspeed, perhaps 20 or 30 seconds per resume. She weeds, sorts and creates a pile that she'll go back to and really read (about a two-minute process, if you're lucky).

Accordingly, the most egregious sin the resume writer can commit is to submit something that's physically hard to read. You can't make Susie's job harder than it already is and expect to enjoy her favor. So no single-spacing or full declarative sentences (not "I wrote the plan," but "Wrote plan."). No eighth-inch margins. Nothing longer than two pages (unless the subsequent pages are labeled "Addendum" and contain non-critical information, such as lists of publications, patents, membership, etc.).

Give Susie lots of air. Though the wonders of desktop publishing offer distinct formatting cues to aid her eye in scanning the page (e.g., Caps/bold; Caps/no bold, Bold upper and lower, indenting, bullets, horizontal rules, etc.). Use good-quality, 30-pound paper and ink that doesn't smudge onto her fingers. Create a resume that, upon Susie's first glance, triggers an involuntary little voice in her head: "Thank you, thank you, thank you for understanding how tedious resume screening can be and for understanding my needs."

Unless you're working in a creative profession (public relations, advertising, graphic arts or writing government budgets) avoid stunts like brightly colored paper, Olde English type, diagonal formatting, tri-folded mailers, etc. They suggest to Susie that you're trying to stand out by artificial means rather than your own merits.

"It's a form of trickery," Susie says, "and even if I find it creative, I throw it away."

Remember, Susie wasn't born yesterday. She's read a lot of resumes and has seen a broader spectrum of lies, puffery, distortions, clever omissions and creative historical interpretation than you can possibly imagine. Her hogwash meter has been fine-tuned.

Susie won't automatically accept your unsupported praise as gospel. You say, "significantly enhanced productivity," and she thinks, "What do you mean by significant?" You say, "major program." and she'll ask, "By whose standard?" Susie doesn't like adverbs and adjectives unless they describe something objectively measurable. At best, they simply don't register on her brain. They become "invisible words." At worst, they twang her hogwash meter and you're headed for File 13.

Susie loves numbers she instinctively believes them. You say, "significantly increased sales, lowered costs and improved productivity," and Susie turns skeptical. You say, "increased division sales 14% in seven months while decreasing marketing costs 23% and she'll believe it. After all, she thinks, these data can be objectively measured and checked. "You wouldn't dare lie to me about something I can easily verify."

Susie also has a fondness for past-tense verbs expressed in tight, telegram-like phrases: "Managed department. Drafted five-year plan. Recruited all staff. Negotiated entire transaction."

She likes past-tense verbs because they describe what's already happened. In her mind there's no better proof of what you can do than the fact that you've done it before: "Negotiated sale of six multi-million dollar shopping centers in 14 months," not "able to negotiate high-ticket real estate transactions."

Incidentally, about 80% of Susie's time and effort is spent on the first page of the resume; the second page gets a fast glance, usually to check your educational background from college, subtract 21 from that year and get a rough idea of how old you are. That means if there's really hot information on page two, you'd better find some way to highlight it. Susie reports no particular interest in the "Personal" section found on many resumes, and no interest whatever in whether you like to read, take long walks or play chess.

For male job seekers, though, the frequent, "Married, three children" creates an image of stability, home and hearth that plays well with corporate employers. For women, however, the same statement can mean "Guess who has to go home when one of the kids gets sick?"

Susie doesn't like controversial activities or memberships ("enjoy alligator wrestling and Bart Simpson fan club meetings"). Susie doesn't need to see that your health is excellent of "References upon request," since everyone had better be healthy and have references.

Assessing Present Value

Resume readers don't like being told what to think: They want information laid out for them in a sequence that allows them to use their own judgment size you up. That's why many of them report an almost fanatical distaste for functional resumes, in which the writer omits or downplays his career chronology and instead attempts to create a menu of marketable qualities. A similar distaste exists for Curriculum Vitae (CV's), which don't belong in the corporate job market.

A good resume reader can deduce a lot about you from your career path - where you started, how long you stayed, whether you shifted roles or settings, how fast and often you were promoted and, perhaps most important, who has seen fit to employ you. If we can eavesdrop on Susie's mental organizing process as she scans each resume, we'll find a mind set that sees almost everything in terms of trust, the risk to her if she guesses wrong about you, the stakes, the job's responsibilities and your previous accomplishments.

Automatically, she'll fire a series of questions at you resume focused on who has previously trusted you with what:

1. What's the product statement here? (What do you claim to be in terms of level, roles/functions and prior working settings?) This information is found in the profile, summary statement or objective.
2. Who trusted you before? ("Oh, Exxon? Well, they're pretty demanding. If they thought you were worth hiring, maybe I can too. Joe & Eddy's Fine Refinery and Travel Agency? That doesn't tell me much.")

3. How long have they trusted you? ("If it's more than about three years, you can't be a complete screw-up or they would've fired you, right? Twenty years without a promotion? Not much ambition there.")
4. What were the stakes? What was the biggest thing they trusted you with? This usually is reflected in your job title.
5. What were your responsibilities? (Stop! Don't brag yet. Just give me a nice, objective job description to show me the nature and scope of your responsibilities.")
6. Did you do anything with those responsibilities? ("Now, give me some examples - past tense - of all the marvelous things you've achieved.")
7. Who trusted you before that? How long did they trust you? What were the stakes there? Responsibilities? Accomplishments? (And so on and so on back through your career.) If there's a lot of jobs or you're going back more than 15 years, collapse that history into a category called Earlier Experience." To Susie, no part of your career path is irrelevant in helping to understand your choices, achievements and motivation, so don't eliminate experience.
8. Where did you go to school?
9. Anything else I need to know to get a full and accurate understanding of you and what you offer?

All this data should hang together, paint a picture and not raise alarming unaddressed concerns ("Why is the date of your college degree missing? You must be real old. Why is there a four-year gap in your employment history?"). Without an answer to these concerns, File 13 awaits.

If there really were a Susie, she'd emphasize one last point: The resume doesn't have to say everything. It's a screening tool, a brochure to help employers decide who's worth meeting in person. There will be time in the interview process to flesh out details, amplify strengths and demonstrate your personal attributes. A resume is a suitcase; travel light and don't try to turn it into a steamer trunk. If you keep lean, objective, orderly and logical, it will be one of the just a few resumes that Susie will welcome.

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