EFFECTIVE THANK YOU LETTERS

BY GALEN TINDER

Post-interview thank-you notes fall into the unglamorous job search category of follow-up. But no matter how formulaic and tedious to write, they are an important part of a job search campaign. People are rarely told, of course, that they were hired because of their exceptional thank-you letters, but when two or more candidates for a position have uniformly superior credentials, a person's follow-up may tip the scales in her favor.

Thank you notes are not always treasured by their recipients. One hiring manager for a large company recently remarked that since all interviewees are expected to send thank-you notes after an informational or job interview, he pays no attention to the ones he gets, or to who does and does not send them. But, another manager, also at a large company, says that because everybody is supposed to send one, those who do not write stand out in an unfavorable light. She reads carefully the thank-you notes she gets, and takes them into account when evaluating how candidates present themselves. Interviewees who do not follow up, she confirms, lose points.

So, why gamble. If you want to cover all your bases, follow up on your interviews. It can never hurt. Unless, that is, you do it poorly. Be sure to give your note or letter the same care and attention you devote to your cover letter and resume.

The best follow-up thank you letter is a prompt letter. Get yours in the mail no later than 48 hours after the interview. Promptness demonstrates efficiency and good organization in the eyes of many people who hire employees. Many employers will assume that the promptness and care with which you write says something about the habits and attitudes you will bring to the workplace. Moreover, the person to whom you write will still remember you when she gets your communication. Don’t take the chance that this small but important task will find itself at the bottom of next weeks priority C to-do list.

Having established its value, let’s look at the most common questions people ask about thank you communications.

1. **Should they be hand-written or computer produced?** Both methods of production will do the trick. Some people like to write their thank-yous on the inside of a card. If you opt for this route, just make sure that you select a one that is appropriate. Nature scenes work well; save the Dilbert

cards for other occasions. One more caveat. The most noble of sentiments can be ruined by sloppy or indecipherable handwriting.

2. What if after the interview, you are no longer interested in the position or the company?

Not every follow-up letter needs to gush with enthusiasm. There is nothing wrong about writing with polite restraint. View it as a matter of good manners. Besides, the oft-cited dictum, 'it's a small world,' applies to our even smaller world of endeavor.

3. Can you use the thank you letter to score points?

Sure, as long as you are not crude and obvious about it, the letter offers the perfect opportunity to put the right spin on your interview. Think along the lines of bonding, damage control, reemphasis and giving back.

Bonding often takes place around common interests outside of work. During your visit to the company you may discover that you share your interviewers enthusiasm for deep-sea fishing, raising tomatoes or pottery. If you chatted about your mutual interests before or after the interview, work into the letter with a sentence or two.

Did you walk back to your car berating yourself for your lame response to an important question? Here is your chance to reposition yourself. Don't indulge in self-castigation, aim rather for a straightforward approach: "After our conversation I realized that. . . ."

On a happier note, you may have noticed scoring on an important point or two during your interview. Don't dwell on it, but return to the subject with an added fact or thought on the topic.

Finally, if you can, give a little back. We are not recommending including a check with your letter, but perhaps an information reference to a subject of concern to the interviewer, "By the way, I have included a copy of an interesting article on IT systems and inventory control that I noticed in last week's *Business Week*."

4. If I want the job, should I say so?

Yes, employers want to hire people who are enthused about the job and the position.

5. How about the e-mail thank-you note?

These are increasingly acceptable in some industries and professions. But for important formal interviews an old-fashioned letter is still the best bet.

6. What if I interviewed with three people?
Then that equals three thank-you notes.

7. How long should these letters be?
Don’t exceed one page.

8. What is the most serious mistake people make with thank-you letters?
The number one mistake is not sending one at all. Coming in a close second is sending a letter that is poorly written and contains careless errors. If you are uncertain how to write or organize a formal letter, consult a business reference source.