

BOOK REVIEW

'Slam Dunk Cover Letters' (2nd Edition) by Mark Rowh

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The inherent importance of communication is well underlined by the expansion in related literature and the increasing specialization and sub specializations seen in this field. 'Slam Dunk Cover Letters' highlights this phenomenon. Effective communication is required not only in our day to day personal lives but, also, in the business space at all points: be it the process of getting the job, retaining the job or progressing in the job. Mark Rowh has focused on the importance of written communication for the job seekers.

In the present age when correspondence, even in the highly competitive cut throat job market has limited itself to the electronic media where premium is placed on lexical economy, this book goes a long way to demonstrate how the reader can ensure that his/her resume is not one of the unfortunate ones to find its way into the stand-by-applications file that rarely sees the light of the day. It is true that both job seekers and employers today prefer the e-mail rather than the conventional postman to establish and maintain the communication channel. It is equally true that for a resume to get a positive nod and a second reading from a selector, the covering letter plays a pivotal role in arousing interest. The covering letter decides which will be the short listed even if all of them appear similar. In the job market where the supply in most sectors far exceeds the demand for candidates, the covering letter ensures that your resume is the one set aside from a stack of others as a preliminary step towards selection. After all, screening the resume is a far more serious, tedious, and time consuming task than screening the applications that present at a glance the suitability of a candidate for a job. The first step of the short listing of who all seem to be passable candidates largely involves the rejection of many more that do not seem to fit the bill. It is truly a process of weeding out of applications that fail to impress the selector or arouse his/her interest in the first.

In the introductory chapter itself, Rowh establishes the significance of the covering letter, he demonstrates that both the resume and the covering letter are complementary to each other: sloppiness in either can cost you that job which you thought was tailor made for you! He shows how the covering letter prepares the backdrop against which, at a subsequent stage, the employer will look at your resume. It is what prompts

him/her to read your resume and to invite you for an interview. Well, that is exactly the purpose that the covering letter is intended to serve.

A good application, Rowh says is like the first impression – 'lasting and decisive'. Therefore, it is imperative that you present yourself as a promising candidate without sacrificing the brevity of the letter, remembering well that the selector has to juggle his routine chores alongside zeroing in on one or a few likely applicants that suit the job profile. Moreover, there may be more than one selector down the line with a variety of profes

sional backgrounds such as, clerks, assistant managers, placement consultants, and even higher-level workers, such as, directors and advisors. It is obvious that to be a winner your letter be of interest to as many of them as possible. He lists some fundamental qualities that go a long way in ensuring that your letter appeals to a larger and varied audience. These are clarity and understandability; focus on your suitability for the job.

The prewriting task involves undergoing what Rowh calls the "why / what test", a kind of self-scrutiny that asks what your objective is in writing; why would anyone read it; what do you wish to achieve by it; and how will the reader react?

The second chapter, 'Cover Letter Fundamentals', begins with a discussion of the importance of the cover letters. There are many job adverts that specifically demand a covering letter. Secondly, any one resume may fit the requirements for several job openings available with the employer; a covering letter clearly indicating the job you are interested in will help the selector screen your resume with the specific job profile in mind. Then there is the likelihood that a resume addressed to no one in particular will only succeed in being lost in the personnel department at best. However, addressing it to a specific person not only fulfils the demand of basic business etiquette, but also ensures that the resume reaches the person or department it is intended for. A dated cover letter helps put on record when the resume was submitted, helpful in case there is an application deadline. Finally, information that you wish to highlight from

your resume can be mentioned in the letter as a means of reinforcement.

The next section addresses a very pertinent issue: the significance of cover letters vis-à-vis the electronic age. Rowh attributes it to the experts that even when resumes are posted electronically, the cover letter still has its role to play; as discussed in the previous section. However, this may take the form of a covering e-mail message or be a conventional covering letter in the form of an attachment file. Moreover, electronic submissions are sometimes a follow up to a traditional letter. Finally, a cover letter helps place the resume in context even if sent electronically and waters the job scene sufficiently for the resume to take roots.

Among the basic elements of cover letters, Rowh touches upon the return address; date; inside address; subject line; salutation; body; complimentary close; name and signature; and notations.

The subsection on the aesthetic aspects of a cover letter is useful. Rowh suggests that the paper be a standard 8.5 by 11 inch white sheet of heavy paper, preferably the same size as the resume. The chapter concludes with special tips for electronic submissions.

Chapter 3 is devoted to the two basic styles of cover letters. Which one the writer chooses is a matter of personal choice and dependent on the recipient it is intended for. The first type is the standard, polite, and formal type that has an undertone of respect for the employer. The second type is what Rowh calls the 'Bold and Brassy letter'. A feature wise comparison of the two styles allows the writer to decide upon his/her choice. Included among the samples of both the types are scores of letters to give the reader a good glimpse of how s/he can go about the task. Stylistic elements may be varied to suit the specific job requirements and the employers.

In Chapter 4, 'Playing the Cover Letter Game', Rowh elaborates on the microelements of the components broadly discussed in chapter 2. Much of the chapter gives in to repetition, though the section on making the most use of the information gleaned from the job insert is additional. In the same chapter, a worthwhile section is the one giving out tips on how not to be 'annoying' in the cover letters. Elements best avoided are slip-shoddiness, excessive punctuation, highlighting, hyperbole, pushiness, and definitely, humor. The section on the use of internet and e-mail, however, tends to repeat a great deal of what has been presented in earlier chapters. Even so, tips on sources, such as, reference books can be useful. Also useful is the discussion on how to be honest in presenting your weaknesses carefully in a positive language.

The penultimate chapter of the book is much like a conclusion for the writer and has little relevance for the reader. It could well have been dropped from the book without having any impact on its general feel or layout.

The final chapter is a collection of thirty Slam Dunk Cover Letters as Rowh calls them, of which some are in the form of e-mail messages, though the need for a separate such chapter escapes the reader when chapter 3 was already devoted to the purpose. The samples themselves offer a wide variety and are useful to not only the new but also the veteran job seeker.

Paying attention to the tools of the e-age is certainly strength of this book. Overall, the book has been well conceived and well begun, but the inspiration and energy of the author appears to wane somewhere by the middle of the book. Despite its usefulness, the book betrays a few notable and at times glaring shortcomings. Instead of skipping a section on grammar altogether, some practical tips for dealing with grammar would have been of great value to the users. A number of unnecessary repetitions of concepts and ideas do not apparently serve any useful purpose; they rather have a perplexing effect upon the reader. Finally, the front and back covers of the book declare that the book carries more than 100 sample cover letters, though the fact is the number of letters in the book is much smaller (80)! The section titled 'helpful words and phrases to use in cover letters' is indeed an innovative approach, but a more detailed and better designed list would have been more in place.

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