

# Demonstrating Your Value To Potential Employers

*What hiring managers perceive your worth to be depends on whether they believe you can fulfill their needs*

**W**hen a financial executive's 23-year career with a large Southern California toy manufacturer ended abruptly after a reorganization, he immediately launched a job-search campaign. But despite his energy and motivation, he was having little luck.

After several months, the executive realized his mistake: He had been approaching employers as though he deserved to be hired—as though his needs had to be filled before he would consider a position.

"In the early stages of my job search, I was trying to duplicate what I had with my previous employer," he says. "My networking conversations

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and interviewing technique focused on what I did before. As a result, I put myself into a small box with limited appeal."

He eventually learned that by focusing on how he could meet hiring managers' needs, his perceived value rose dramatically. He soon became a serious contender for most positions he sought.

"By changing to a customer-driven approach, I began focusing on the employer's needs and how I could fill them," he says. "By researching the prospective company, individual and position, I found greater success in cover letters and interviews by discussing more of the particulars about them and less about me."

Contrary to popular belief, your value as a potential employee isn't determined by a formula consisting of a weighted average of your previous compensation, market salary averages and your competency and skills.

Your value to prospective employers is only as great as they perceive it to be. And their perceptions are based on how well you demonstrate your ability to satisfy their hiring needs. The more completely you fill those needs, the greater your perceived value.

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By Peter J. Leets and William L. Ricci

The key is to attract employers' attention and effectively communicate your professional value throughout the employment process.

## Create a Marketing Plan

Before starting your search, decide which industry, profession and location to focus on and develop an appropriate transition marketing plan. Also determine which information resources to consult for employment guidance and opportunities.

Sources should include employers and company decision-makers; search firms and employment agencies; job-hunting support groups and professional associations where you can establish networking contacts; newspaper and trade-publication want ads; and friends, business associates and other influential people who can help your plan work.

Many job hunters mistakenly believe that networking simply means calling all their friends to ask whether they've heard of any job openings. The problem with this approach is that there's nothing in it for the contacts, so they're unlikely to be helpful for long. Rather than establish or enhance a networker's value, this selfish approach directly diminishes your professional value and access to opportunities.

To receive benefits from a network, you must give something first. That "something" will vary from contact to contact, but can range from information about industry developments and job openings to mutual support, a mentoring opportunity and a chance to feel

good about helping another person. If you approach a potential contact strictly to ask for a job, you almost always can expect rejection.

"Informational interviewing is the name of the game," says Beverly Fuentes, a vice president and manager of career services at Bank of America in Whittier, Calif. "People are much more responsive to a request for information than a request for a job. [They] enjoy talking about their experience and sharing their professional knowledge rather than having to say no to job hunters asking for work."

Through your contacts, try to find

out what's most important to prospective employers, suggests E. Joseph McKay, vice president of human resources at Mattel Toys in El Segundo, Calif. For example, is it quicker delivery, shorter product-development cycles or better yields?

Also try to uncover issues related to the firm's culture. You'll be able to work some of this information into your responses during job interviews. Or, you may decide the company has the wrong environment for you.

"You may be surprised at how readily with a little prompting good contacts will talk

about the subtleties of 'how things get done around here,'" says Mr. McKay.

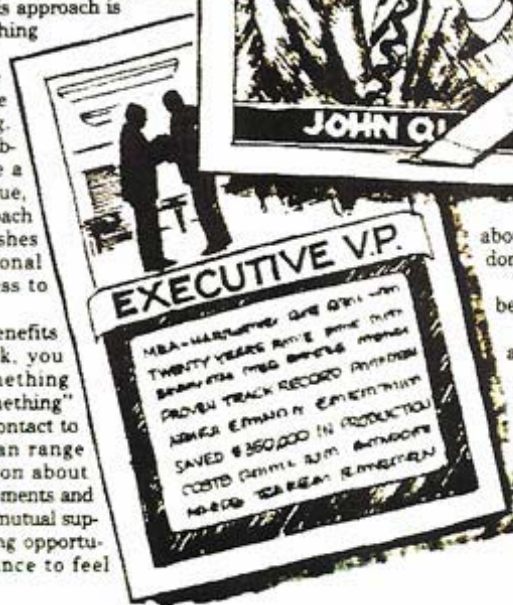
The following tips should help you become a better networker:

- Always be prepared with a plan and be sure to refer to it frequently

- When telephoning, always begin by mentioning the name of the person who referred you, and request permission to take up their time.

- Don't dwell on why you're job hunting. A simple explanation usually works well, such as

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# Conveying your value

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"Mary Smith told me you've held responsible positions in the computer-software industry for many years. John, I'm considering a career change and have had an interest in your industry for some time. Would you mind sharing your views of the industry's future with me?"

\* Ask for face-to-face meetings. It's much easier to establish meaningful relationships in person.

\* Maintain your network by talking with contacts monthly. After each meeting, note the next contact date and your objective on the calendar, and always send a thank-you note.

Many people don't invest in professional relationships until they're out of work. If you're currently employed, begin developing your network today. You can build a significant network in a short time by scheduling one meeting or breakfast each week.

## A Targeted Resume

The objective of a resume is to survive the first cut and earn you an interview. But if you don't address the hiring manager's needs, you'll never get through the front door.

Unfortunately, too many resumes sound as though the writers hope to be hired into their old positions. Rather than link their accomplishments to hiring companies' needs, they list experience and skills unrelated to the available position and its responsibilities.

Most resume screeners don't have time to read between the lines to figure out whether you're an appropriate fit. Since most resumes are scanned in a matter of seconds, think of yours as a direct-response mail piece that must pique a reader's interest immediately. Not only must it be well-written, it should look good, too.

Douglas Richardson, president of Richardson & Co., a career counseling firm in Bala Cynwyd, Pa., once received 289 responses to a single employment ad and had to narrow the pile down to the five best applicants. He scanned each resume for approximately 25 seconds and, like most screeners and hiring managers, judged them partly based on his first impressions of their appearance, he says, adding that typos and form letters always lost out.

When you need to be in the top 1% to 2% just to get into the game, you can't afford anything less than the best stationery and printing equipment. If you lose, let it be due to those things you can't control, not those you can.

To create a winning resume, adhere to the following guidelines:

\* Use a chronological format and don't exceed two pages.

\* Use white or off-white, high-quality paper with black ink and a business typeface.

\* Don't waste space and take readers' time with such headings as "Experience," "Education," "Resume" and "References Available." Readers know it's a resume and that you'll provide references if they're requested.

\* Eliminate such self-serving words as "wonderful," "professional," "high-powered," "cost-conscious" and "hard-working." You can't expect to develop trust when using subjective language that makes the reader wonder how much is an exaggeration. Instead, concentrate on quantifiable accomplishments. Above all, demonstrate value relative to the buyer's needs—not yours.

## Impressive Cover Letters

Responses to ads should be targeted to the employer's expressed needs and follow the order listed in the ad. If none are stated, address the employer's probable needs.

Don't begin your response with "I saw your ad

in.... Since you're attempting to fill their needs, begin your letter with "you" or "your." An opening, such as, "Your description of the electrical engineer you seek matches my accomplishments, experience and objectives," gets right to the point.

Use bullets to list those achievements that match the company's specifications. If the ad asks for an ability to control costs, a possible response would be: "Reduced insurance costs \$775,000 without increasing risk." Then close the letter with an "extra" you can offer that will add value beyond the employer's expectations.

You might say: "As you can see, my accomplishments closely parallel your needs. Additionally, an M.B.A. and experience with strategic planning may help me more completely accomplish your objectives for this position."

In short, your letter should state what you're going to tell the reader; then state it; then tell them what you told them. It should be no longer than one page and have a fair share of white space.

## Shining in Interviews

If you've made it to the interview stage, you succeeded in impressing screeners and communicating your value on paper. Now you have to wow the interviewer in person. You can start by being polite to everyone you meet in the building.

"First impressions are very important," says Susan Skara, vice president of human resources for Homedco in Fountain Valley, Calif. "Those impressions aren't limited to what the interviewer believes. I put a lot of stock in the feedback I receive from support personnel. When someone doesn't treat the receptionist or secretary with respect, a red flag is raised."

Until you reach the offer phase, concentrate on the company's needs and put aside your concerns about such issues as benefits, compensation and vacation time. This requires that you do your homework on the employer by visiting a library's reference department. One helpful source is Citicorp's Global Report, an on-line database.

When asked such broad questions as, "Tell me about yourself," respond thoughtfully. To answer the question adequately, ask: "Where would you like me to begin?" or "To ensure I make the best use of your time, what would you like me to concentrate on?" Show your ability to take control in a meaningful way while providing organized, targeted responses.

When completing an answer to a question, ask the interviewer how he or she usually handles that type of situation or what approaches have been successful within her company. Encourage the interviewer to give you information that can help you address the firm's needs more completely, thereby enhancing your value as a candidate.

To be better prepared to answer questions about yourself, write a one-page biographical sketch, then rehearse a one- to two-minute oral presentation. When you're unable to get an interviewer to specify where he or she wants you to begin, use the sketch as a reference and start at the first relevant point.

When discussing previous positions and other aspects of your background, highlight related responsibilities, two or three of your most significant accomplishments and what you learned from difficult situations. But try not to dwell on anything.

Until the final interview, only ask questions that demonstrate your interest in fulfilling the company's needs. Possible questions include, "What will be most important during the first few months?" "Please tell

me about the people I will be working most closely with." "What do you view as the most important objectives for the person assuming these responsibilities?" "Will I be able to count on your support when I encounter difficult issues?"

Avoid directly asking for the job near the end of the interview. If it's not the right time, this tactic could backfire. Instead, ask a question that illustrates your understanding of the corporate culture and the importance of a good personal fit, such as, "I'm sure there are several people who are qualified to do this job. Still, it has been my experience that chemistry and the ability to become a positive team member play a significant part in determining who will be successful. I feel very good about you and your company. How do you see me fitting in with your team?"

If the interviewer says, "I'm not sure," ask why. Then try to overcome the objections that otherwise may not have surfaced and lay his or her misgivings about your candidacy to rest.

## Negotiation Tactics

Once you've proven your value to an employer, you'll likely receive an offer. Consider asking for the entire offer in writing, then request a day or two to review it (more than three days and the deal will probably begin to cool). This will give you time to consider the proposal and develop a strategy to request any necessary changes.

Limited time will actually strengthen your negotiating position. But remember that everyone needs to feel they've won, and no one should believe they've been taken advantage of.

Before haggling for your next job offer, consider the four rules of successful negotiating:

1. *He who mentions price first, loses.* Once you state your price, you've set the ceiling or the floor. When someone asks you what you want to earn in the position, say something like, "I haven't thought about compensation relative to your opportunity yet. After all, I haven't had the chance to clearly

establish my value by showing how I can meet your needs. However, since you bring it up, what is the range for this position?"

When you do state your salary expectations, avoid giving a range. For example, when you say, "\$75,000 to \$100,000," what have you said you'll work for? \$75,000!

2. *Never negotiate unless you're prepared to walk away from the offer.* Once you suggest a change, you've voided the original offer. So make sure it's worth the risk before trying to negotiate for more.

3. *Make no decisions until you receive an offer.* Unless a position is an absolute waste of time, fight to make it all the way through the screening process. You never know how good a deal you could end up with. The worst that can happen is that you'll have to decline an offer.

4. *All offers are good offers.* Regardless of what you hope for or need, an offer means someone wants you enough to ask you to join their company. Be sure to thank them, and explain how much you want to join the organization and how excited you are that they've selected you. Then start negotiating.

Keep in mind that at each stage of the your job search, your potential value will be appraised. Perception is everything, so when talking to networking contacts and hiring managers, make sure you're creating the right picture. ●

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