

Avoiding the Resume Trash Pile

By KRIS MAHER
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Last week, Jim Kissel, a recruiter with Management Recruiters International, received a resume with an unusual work history. According to the document, the candidate, who had stressed her reputation for accuracy in a cover letter, had held one job from 1998 to 2013.

An irritated Mr. Kissel considered calling the person to chide her for sloppiness. But he resisted the temptation -- mainly, he says, because she didn't have anywhere near the right experience for the position he was trying to fill anyway.

As resumes pile up in the current woeful job market, so do such boneheaded missteps. From the inexperienced college graduates, who might be expected to slip up in their dealings with recruiters, to more seasoned executives who should know better, recruiters say they are frequently shocked at the number of candidates who make a poor first impression. Even initially promising candidates sometimes blow it after being sent on interviews, causing recruiters embarrassment and hurting their chances of working with those recruiters again.

"We go through a process to tell people how not to self-destruct," says Mr. Kissel, who is based in Palm Beach Gardens, Fla. "Sometimes people don't pay attention."

You can't avoid every mistake, and recruiters do make allowances under certain circumstances. But you can lessen the odds of self-destructing -- and keep your resume out of the trash pile -- by making sure you avoid some of their big pet peeves. Here are a few tips:

Drop the gimmicks. Don't send presents, trinkets, theater tickets, candy, shoes or whatever else you dream up with your resume in hopes of getting noticed. It will probably backfire.

Just ask the candidate who sent Smooch Reynolds, chief executive of Repovich-Reynolds Group, a Pasadena, Calif., executive search firm, a little stuffed buffalo along with his resume. "Is this how you want to be thought of as a player in the industry?" Ms. Reynolds asks. It didn't help that the candidate was "a nonstarter" during a phone interview, she adds.

A far better, and simpler, approach is to show "what competitive advantages as a professional you bring to a recruiter's prospective client," Ms. Reynolds says. Consider how you can help a recruiter sell you to a client. Do your research to make sure that a recruiter's specialty matches your field as closely as possible before initiating contact.

Don't keep secrets. Thomas Ward, principal of Resource Staffing Consultants, a Green Bay, Wis., firm that places architects, says he had a conversation with a potential candidate recently who refused to tell him why she wanted to leave her current employer. Other candidates, he notes, sometimes refuse to divulge salary requirements.

"People like that drive you nuts," Mr. Ward says. "They play the most common pieces of information so close to the vest." Also high on Mr. Ward's list of turnoffs: candidates who send resumes to clients on their own -- or scatter them across the Internet. If you hope to work with a recruiter, keep track of where your resumes are and where you are sending them, and keep the recruiter in the loop.

Listen to a recruiter's tips about a company. Recruiters usually coach candidates about a company's culture or what to expect in an interview. Yet many candidates think they know better, complains Jonathan Spatt, president of Hospitality Executive Search Inc., in Boston.

Mr. Spatt says one of his candidates flew from California to interview for a job as vice president of operations at a Texas hotel company, sporting a flowered shirt and sandals and not wearing socks. "Although we prepped him to wear a suit and tie and wingtips, he thought he knew more," says Mr. Spatt. The candidate wasn't hired.

Don't hedge about openings. If a recruiter calls with an opportunity, don't wait until your name has been submitted to the client to decide you're not interested. You risk earning the recruiter's resentment. "I would much rather have someone turn me down right away," says Buffy Filippell, president of TeamWork Consulting Inc., a Shaker Heights, Ohio, recruiting firm specializing in the sports industry. Figure out where your career is headed and what positions would interest you ahead of time, she says.

Don't expect a recruiter to be keen to help you land a job right away. Remember that recruiters work for companies, not candidates. And yet, recruiters can often help over the long term. When Julie Quick relocated to Florida two years ago and had no job prospects in the state, she contacted Mr. Kissel after discovering his marketing expertise on the MRI Web site. "I approached him strictly as a networking opportunity," she says.

The two hit it off in an initial phone conversation, and during the next year, Mr. Kissel put her in touch with several contacts. When an opening came up for a director of strategic marketing at First Marketing in Pompano Beach, Fla., he submitted Ms. Quick's name, and she landed the position.

After about a year on the job, she worked with Mr. Kissel again in May -- this time when she hired two candidates he presented for business-development director positions. "I've always had a great relationship with him," she says.

Write to Kris Maher at kris.maher@wsj.com³; to see previous columns go to www.CareerJournal.com⁴