

## Advice for getting started: Ten common mistakes in résumés and cover letters

By Petrula Vrontikis, Vrontikis Design Office

People in this business are trained to make fast judgments, so avoid these errors in your first impression.

1.

“Dear Sir or Madam...”

Only on a bad day do I feel like either.

Address me as “Dear Ms. Vrontikis” if you’re the formal type, or just “Dear Petrula.” It’s OK, my studio is small and we are pretty easy-going. The point is to use the level of formality appropriate to the type of firm you send it to. “Mr.” or “Ms.” (never “Mrs.”) is the safest choice for large firms and in-house agencies.

Beware: “To Whom It May Concern” may be no one—canned cover letters are meaningless. Keep in mind that meaningful letters receive meaningful responses.

The question to consider is: What unique qualities do I have, and how will these qualities uniquely benefit this firm. Obviously this requires soul-searching and researching. Both of these are in your job description as a job hunter.

Many times candidates feel the need to present someone other than themselves in a résumé’s content or design. Authenticity is one of the qualities most appreciated by interviewers. Be who you are. If you’re clever—be clever. If you’re not, don’t try to be.

2.

“Dear Mr. VonTrikis”

OK, so my name isn’t so easy. Well, neither is Steff Geissbuhler of Chermayeff & Geismar, or Michael Vanderbyl. Even Margo Chase gets her name butchered.

Think of this as test #1. Do you really know how to research? Do you care if it’s right? We certainly do. Call the firm. Confirm the spelling of the recipient’s name, ask for their exact title, then use this opportunity to check the address you have. Designers move around a lot.

Ask if there may be an additional person in the firm to send your résumé to. The firm’s principal may be too busy to see you, but it’s the Creative Director’s job to.

3.

“... the number you have dialed has been disconnected ...”

Timing is everything, so when a firm needs you, you want them to find you. The time after graduation is filled with change—which may include your phone number and email address. Your résumé should have some “permanent” way of reaching you—maybe a pager number, a free Hotmail email address, or your parent’s home phone number. It’s such a disappointment to not be able to locate the perfect candidate three months or so from when their portfolio was reviewed.

4.

“So-and-so recommended I call you.”

There are times candidates have said this confidently, but I’ve never heard of “so-and-so.” It makes this transaction awkward and brings up suspicion. Make sure you ask permission before using anyone’s name. Also confirm the relationship this person has to your desired target when you ask.

5.

“I’ll call next week to follow up.”

Great statement, and by the way, I believe you. So do what you say you’re going to do. It’s test #2.

Don’t bother typing “Call me...” or “I can be reached at...” It’s your job to get a job, and follow-up is in your job description.

6.

“I’ll just email it to you.”

Unless the firm specifically requests a fax or email, never send your résumé that way. It’s cold, impersonal and just generally looks bad. The overall impression you make includes your ability to make the most of these materials. Choose good paper. Be creative. Make the presentation something special.

Emails and faxes shift the focus to content (work experience). If you’re just starting out, there may not be that much content, so you need to focus on the presentation aspects. That way you let the limited content you do have shine beautifully.

Do make sure your materials can be read when photocopied or faxed. You’d be surprised at how often these materials are forwarded from one designer to another looking for candidates.

7.

“. . . I designed stationary packages . . .”

Designing packages that don’t move concerns me :-). Misspellings and other language problems are death to this process.

In addition to the obvious purpose a résumé and cover letter have to introduce, inform, and impress, they are a way for you to alleviate my fears about hiring you right out of school. These include lack of attention to detail such as grammar and consistency. The truth is that we are fairly confident about your creative skills, but concerned about your competence and general work style. Some design firms just don’t hire candidates right out of school, because it’s so hard to know what they don’t know.

8.

Job OBJectiVe

Using too many fonts and styles, or fonts that are too trendy is just annoying! Think of a trendy font as a hairstyle that looks great today—but looking back a year from now, you’re probably going to say: “What was I thinking?!”

Know the difference between “cool” and wrong. A current example of this is using all lower case letters. It may look cool elsewhere, but for these documents, it’s just wrong.

9.

“Worked on many projects for local design studios and directly with companies.”

Avoid vague references about your employment experience. I don’t have high expectations of a recent grad in this area. Simply state your title, the name of the firm and its location. Include a brief sentence defining your responsibilities. Don’t give me a long list of the firm’s clients or other “padding.” Stick to what you worked on. Definitely keep school projects, including sponsored projects, out of this category.

Beware: listing a lot of experience, employed or freelance, but not showing any of the work in your book makes me suspicious. I’m concerned that your design approach may drastically change when the project is real.

Do include an original or a copy of a letter of recommendation if you’ve completed an internship or worked for a recognized design office.

10.

“I’ll take it!”

One of the biggest mistakes is not going through and completing this process. Accepting an offer before you graduate is so seductive. You may be relieved you don’t have to go through this, but beware: it’s like getting married at 19. You’ll never really know what else is out there :-)

This is a nerve-racking and stressful endeavor, but actually quite rewarding once you get going. It’s one of the only times you can play “Show me yours and I’ll show you mine.” :-). Meeting people you’ve admired, talking about the ideas you’ve been passionate about, seeing great studios, and ultimately deciding what

appeals to you most, is really great. It is an interesting test to trust your intuition to discriminate between perception and reality. It's the best way to be introduced to a design community that you'll be a part of for many years.

#### About the Author

Petrula Vrontikis is one of the West Coast's leading graphic designers. As principal and creative director of Vrontikis Design Office, her Los Angeles-based design firm, Vrontikis's work has appeared in over 30 books on graphic design and is part of the permanent collection of the Library of Congress. Her portfolio includes an extensive list of national and international clients, ranging from Fortune 500 companies to small proprietorships.

She is a Senior Faculty Member in the Graduate and Undergraduate Graphic Design Programs at the world-renowned Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California

#### **Insights on writing your résumé**

By Steff Geissbuhler, Chermayeff & Geismar Inc.

I can tell a lot from your résumé. It is probably the first I hear of you and therefore an introduction to you as a person and as a professional designer. It's your one-page portfolio. It's the virtual you.

The way your cover letter is written tells me whether you did your homework before sending off the résumé. Misspelling my name or that of the firm is definitely not a qualifying asset. (I know they're both difficult names and should be the final round question in a designer's spelling bee contest.) But come on! You can look it up. We are in the Yellow Pages.

Carefully state your interest and why you want to work for us and why you think you're just what we're looking for. Generic flattery isn't getting you anywhere, but a reference to something which caught your interest might help and tells me that you know something about us.

The résumé itself is definitely information which should demand my undivided attention. It needs to be designed. Your choice of typefaces and typography, the layout and the organization of information, the paper stock, etc., all contribute to the way I perceive you as a potential designer working for us. It also shows me what you can do on a single piece of paper. But high wire acts are dangerous, so keep it simple and readable. (Even David Carson's business card is ultimately readable.) No elaborate personal logos, please, especially if you're just out of school. It's a bit pretentious.

Your résumé needs to motivate me to want to ask for your portfolio. Your education and work experiences are very important, but ultimately it's the live you, your work and presentation, which make me want to hire you.

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