

A Little Spit and Polish: How to revamp your resumé and reinvent yourself



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Out of work and face to face with the frightening task of finding employment in a down economy, Tom McAlister has turned to Brand Man to save the day.

With his bulging biceps and green cape, Brand Man is brave, bold, and full of bravado. He also happens to be a cartoon representation of McAlister himself.

McAlister, who works in the advertising and marketing industry, thought up the idea toward the end of last year, when, for the first time after seven years with the same employer, he found himself looking for work. He tried his hand at a traditional resumé--the kind that list name and work experience in nothing but text. Then, surveying his prospects in an increasingly competitive job market, he realized he needed to do something different if he wanted to get noticed.

"I love comic books and I'm a huge geek, so as soon as I thought up the idea to make a resumé into a comic strip--that was it," he says.

The result was a 15-panel comic strip that quite literally illustrates McAlister's accomplishments. While the 31-year-old hadn't gotten a job by March 1, the calls were indeed flooding in.

McAlister certainly isn't the only job-seeker reinventing him- or herself in recent months. With the national economy in a historic slump and unemployment higher than it's been since the late 1960s, a number of other professionals are reinvesting time and money in their

careers by revamping their resumé.

The process is painstaking but can pay off. With more applicants on the market than ever before, recruitment experts who admit to spending no more than ten seconds on each resumé say it's critical for job-seekers to do something to distinguish their C.V. from others in the crowd.

Still, the same experts warn it's important not to make too loud of a statement, for fear of alienating recruiters.

"Designing a resumé is a bit like walking a tightrope," says **Greg Gary, managing director of Technisource, the IT staffing arm of recruitment firm Spherion.** "Say too little and you get ignored; say too much, and you run the risk of not being taken seriously."

Emphasizing creativity

For McAlister, who is applying for jobs in a creative industry, the comic-strip resumé has piqued interest across the board. But even in the most humdrum of industries, showing a certain penchant for thinking independently is rarely a bad thing.

For some applicants, this means a five-minute video or DVD resumé with "candid comments" akin to those one might see on outtakes from audition tapes that wannabes send to producers of reality television shows.

For others, it means sticking to the traditional medium of paper, but embracing an extraordinary design.

Debra Wheatman, director of career counseling at Vault.com, says something as simple as a gray-shaded text box can call attention to certain aspects of a resumé and grab attention.

"There are things you can do with formatting to make a resumé look high style or more appealing," she says. "The ultimate goal is to make a recruiter remember your resumé, and any number of steps can accomplish that."

Still others apply creativity to the type of media through which they convey their experience; instead of using exclusively paper or video, these folks branch out into personal websites and blogs, or they create professional online presences on social networking sites such as LinkedIn or Facebook.

Bruce Powell, managing partner of IQPartners, a Human Resources firm in Toronto, says a professional Web presence can speak more loudly than the boldest resumé.

"Candidates can and should use [these resources] as opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge and expertise in their field," says Powell. "[Web-based media are] a great way to supplement a resumé with examples of your real-world thinking and communication skills."

Crossing the line

In some industries--advertising, marketing, and journalism--creativity can go a long way toward helping hiring managers separate stellar candidates from the ordinary ones. In other industries, however, such as manufacturing, health care, and IT, even a smidge too much creativity can backfire.

Take Brand Man, for example.

If McAlister had sent his comic to, say, a hiring manager in the finance industry, the manager likely would have chuckled but moved on to something a bit more subdued. Along these same lines, lawyers at many law firms said they refuse to accept video resúmes for fear that seeing images of potential job candidates

could open them up to allegations of discrimination.

Liz Bachman, former recruitment manager at NBBJ, an architecture firm in Seattle, says that in today's economy, the sheer volume of applications has forced many recruiters who normally might be receptive to creative thinking to focus exclusively on an applicant's viability for a job.

"Especially when recruiters are receiving thousands of resumés a day, the ones that jump out and say 'I'm your person' or 'Only look at me' aren't winning any extra points," she says. "By and large, the clearer, more compelling, and more concise a resumé can be, the better that resumé will do for you."

Then, of course, there's the temptation to embellish more than just a resumé's design.

A 2003 survey by the Society of Human Resource Management, a trade association in Alexandria, Va., found that 44 percent of 2.6 million respondents said they had misstated their work experience on their resumés. And a 2004 report by the Federal Bureau of Investigation estimated, based on a sampling, that 500,000 people in the United States had listed false college degrees on their resumés and work applications.

"There's a big difference between embellishing design and embellishing the facts," says Eric Frankel, creator of 10 Minutes to Change your Life, a program that offers tangible guidance for business professionals on topics such as personal branding. "The minute you've moved from the first to the second, you've gone too far."

Playing it safe

Most job applicants are honest and choose to distinguish themselves in more subtle ways.

Ellen Lasser, for instance, a strategic sourcing and procurement professional in Dallas, has been out of work since December and has utilized six or seven versions of the same resumé to apply for new jobs since.

While each of these resumés is targeted for a different type of position, all of them follow the same basic structure you learn in books and online reference guides. Behind the scenes, however, Lasser peppers each document with certain keywords so online job search engines will rank her more highly than many of her competitors.

"I do contract negotiations, so I have that phrase in each document ten times," she says. "By doing that, I'm setting myself apart in a way that's only obvious to the software."

Michael Neece, chief strategy officer at Pongoresume.com, an online resumé company in Northborough, Mass., offers up another suggestion: come up with a unique delivery method.

In more than a decade in recruitment, Neece says he has seen everything from video resumés to resumés with gift gimmicks such as cans of spinach (an obtuse "Popeye" reference). While he doesn't recommend these alternatives, he does advise that applicants overnight hard copies of their resumés to an employer, or find someone inside the company to hand-deliver them.

"These are little messages that indicate you're willing to go above and beyond," he says.

Of course the very best way to distinguish your resumé from others in the pile simply is to be the best candidate for the job.

Catherine Breet-Byers, chief stripe changer of Arbez, a career consulting firm in Eagan, Minn., says that while many employees fret over the presentation of their resumé and work experience, it's easy to forget

that the experience itself matters most.

"Presentation will finish second to content every time," she says, "If you're a strong candidate and you find a way to focus on those strengths, even in this economy you can't go wrong."

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