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Dale Dauten / The Corporate Curmudgeon

Words are best career skill: See “Cover Letters from Hell”

“... I get the impressing that your company believes in maintain a lax work environment ...”

“I want to obtain a deeper understanding of how Advertising firms.”

That intriguing sentence is one of the excerpts from “Cover Letters From Hell,” available on the Killian Advertising Web site at <http://www.killianadvertising.com/coverletters.html> and raising an interesting question: Is it the goal of advertising to firm or to soften?

The cover-letter excerpts, taken from those writing to the ad agency looking for work, demonstrate that there is nothing softer than trying for firm.

For instance, one applicant wrote: “This year I want to take the world by storm. I want to make a film. I want to be the producer or the director, whichever will put me in the middle of all the creativity and decision-making. ... I am terrified of the all-out approach I sense in my spirit. ... However, I am not scared enough to let it stop me. I will go push and strive until I have reached the finish line. Pride has no place in my new life. I will be striving for perfection.”

The author is wasting his time on advertising and should focus on writing his potential bestseller, “Me and My Amazing Humility.”

Other examples from the cover letters:

* “It is my desire to develop and generate the revolving scheme to filter the consuming public in.”

* “A résumé is the fabric that makes the person. Now, I must combine those fibers and project them so you can discover a little more personality beyond the framework.”

* “I need real world experience and after reviewing your web site I get the impressing that your company believes in maintain a lax work environment while efficiently meeting the needs of it’s customers (Right?).”

The folks at Killian confide that they took pity on the writer of the last letter, and wrote back to suggest that he seek help with his writing.

The result, as anyone who has tried to offer advice to a job-hunter knows, is destined for the No Good Deed Goes Unpunished file, as the young man fired back, “You should simply be straight forward ... and simply state that your company is seeking a grammar teacher who

lacks creativity but knows how to properly write a letter and knows exactly where to place punctuation.”

And, “I hear this country lacks a lot of grammar school teachers, perhaps that would be a better fit for you.”

I often hear job hunters complain about the absence of courtesy in the job market, about how employers don’t respond to applications or how hiring managers refuse to provide any feedback to applicants. The prior paragraph should clear up that mystery.

The important question here is this: How is it that applicants can write to an ad agency - a company that is in the writing business - and demonstrate how unsuited they are to the position about which they’re inquiring? Wily veteran adman Bob Killian offers an answer, starting with, “Some people imitate Jane Austen because they lack confidence in their authentic voice.”

Jane Austen might toss an inkpot at Killian’s head for dragging her into it. I suspect that most undergraduates would say that Jane Austen is a clothing brand, probably a knockoff of Laura Ashley.

But back to Killian’s point, which is that there’s a danger in straining at image. He writes that students “feel they must inflate their prose by combing the thesaurus to select precisely ... the wrong word.” The “Cover Letters From Hell” demonstrate anew that there is nothing less impressive than working at being impressive.

What is more troubling is how the students shamelessly demonstrate that they don’t know what they don’t know. It’s easy to get help with cover letters – it’s a test on which you can cheat. Not cheating is proof that you don’t deserve the job, that you don’t know enough or care enough to seek out assistance.

Which brings us to the bigger issue: It’s easy to believe that we live in a visual world and that words, especially written ones, don’t matter.

Don’t be taken in by that false logic. The truth is that words are picture-making devices, the visual before the visual, and words remain the important business tool, and the important career skill.

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