Writing a good letter

Your job application covering letter is crucial to making a good first impression. It should leave the prospective employer wanting to know more about you.

YOUR application covering letter is an important marketing tool, which highlights your most attractive qualifications as a potential employee and, if well written, will lead the employer to your CV.

Before writing your letter, analyse your reader and think about how you want to present yourself. Put yourself in the reader’s situation and consider their requirements and needs. Plan your letter accordingly, placing the most important items first, supported by facts.

After this analysis, write your letter, demonstrating how your background, training, work experience and abilities would meet those needs. This approach will help to persuade the reader that you are a good match for the position and that they should interview you.

Remember that you are responsible for explicitly communicating your value to the employer. Employers typically receive many applications for each job opening. Do not expect them to wade through a great deal of text or a poorly written, mundane or disorganised letter to figure out what you can do for them.

**Principles of good letter writing**

**Personalise each letter**
Take the time to research each employer’s practice and personalise each letter. Indicating that you know something about the practice shows that you are careful and interested in the employer. This approach is much more effective than sending out hundreds of identical form letters.

**Highlight one or two of your most significant accomplishments or abilities**
This helps your chances of being remembered. Be brief; demonstrate that you understand the value of the reader’s time.

**Be polite and formal**
Use a polite, formal style that strikes a balance between confidence in yourself and respect for the employer. Be clear, objective and persuasive rather than simply describing your background.

**Be positive in tone, content and expectation**
Do not add details about yourself, your past experience or your preparation that may call attention to your weaknesses or raise questions about your confidence or ability to do the job. Should there be any failures that must unavoidably be included, such as a course that you did not complete, give a positive spin by saying what you learned from the experience.

**Use the active voice**
Use active voice and powerful action verbs in your writing to hold the reader’s interest and convey a sense of energy.

**Be logical**
Group related items together in a paragraph, then organise paragraphs so they flow logically.

**Vet Record Careers aims to reflect the diverse range of career options available to vets and related professionals. It includes features, tips, news and interviews on employment and educational issues, and on personal and professional development. Suggestions for articles are welcome, and should be sent to gill@bva-edit.co.uk**
Ten-minute chat

Sean Wensley is senior veterinary surgeon for communication and education at PDSA and a member of the Companion Animal Welfare Council; he is a trustee of the BVA Animal Welfare Foundation and a committee member of the BVA Ethics and Welfare Group.

What made you decide to join PDSA?
In 2008 PDSA launched its ongoing awareness-raising campaign, ‘Long Live Pets’, which communicates key issues in companion animal health and welfare to the pet-owning public. I am enthusiastic about the contribution that education and awareness can make to many issues and I joined at this time to help craft and deliver the charity’s messages.

How did you get to where you are today?
I grew up exploring the dunes and pine woods of the Sefton coast, finding red squirrels, natterjack toads, bee orchids, barn owls and so on. I naturally became interested in ecology, evolution and the place of our own species in the world, and my interests in conservation and animal welfare followed. After qualifying from Liverpool, I obtained a Masters in animal welfare. My first job – companion animals and exotics – was fantastic, with wonderful, supportive staff. A period spent as a locum allowed me to pursue other animal welfare interests, including projects abroad.

How do you spend a typical day?
I work closely with colleagues in veterinary PR, planning key messages, or contributing a veterinary perspective to animal-related stories in the media. I might participate in a local radio programme or television news bulletin to raise awareness of a disease outbreak, such as parvo virus, which our PetAid hospitals have reported. Alternatively, we may be running a high-profile nationwide campaign. In 2009, these addressed issues such as pet obesity, the problems associated with inappropriate pet choices and husbandry-related problems facing pet rabbits. We reach audiences of millions and constantly direct existing surveillance in this country is frustrating; it is difficult to identify priority issues and assess what impact is being made.

What do you not like?
It is said that ‘today’s news is tomorrow’s chip paper’. Raising awareness is an important starting point, but sustained activity and other, collaborative approaches are necessary. A lack of coordinated animal welfare surveillance in this country is frustrating; without reliable measures it can be difficult to identify priority issues and assess what impact is being made.

Why is your job important?
Improving animal welfare is important, because the vast majority of animals that humans derive benefits from can think, feel and suffer. Animal welfare science is providing the evidence for this, and is shaping our ethical attitudes towards animal use. Vets need to be exposed to this science and the ethical questions it prompts, and lectureships at some of the UK vet schools, funded by the BVA Animal Welfare Foundation, have been invaluable in this respect.

What’s the best piece of advice you were ever given?
A past BVA president advised me that those with a strong interest in animal welfare should act as ‘a thorn in the profession’s side’. I have thought about this at times when I may have hesitated to offer a view.

What is your proudest moment?
Like many colleagues, I wanted to become a veterinary surgeon from a young age, so qualifying was an unforgettable moment. My proudest moment since then was qualifying was an unforgettable moment. Like many colleagues, I wanted to become a veterinary surgeon from a young age, so qualifying was an unforgettable moment. My proudest moment since then was

What was your most embarrassing moment?
This interview!
Ten-minute chat

Sean Wensley

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