

Selling Yourself as a Candidate

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Introduction

Obviously it's important to make the case that hiring you would be a good decision to any potential employer. But when you're seeking a position with a non-profit organization, you also need to communicate something less tangible than your skill-set – you need to articulate your passion for the organization's mission. In this article you'll find tips for demonstrating that passion and making sure that hiring managers see how adding you to the team would strengthen the organization's brand and further its mission. It's important to ensure that you broadcast this message during every step of the process, from writing a cover letter to accepting a final offer.

Cover Letter

Your cover letter is a good place to begin answering a basic question most hiring managers will be asking: Why this organization and why now? Hiring managers and boards of directors want to know that you're not looking at this as just a job or the next logical step in your career. They want to know that you have a deep connection to the organization's mission and goals. Use your cover letter to begin telling your personal story and how it has prepared you for the role you are applying for. And do this in the most specific ways possible. For example, if you are applying for an executive level position at a non-profit that is dedicated to improving K-12 education in the U.S., it's not enough to say that you've always valued education or you love kids. You need to demonstrate your commitment to improving education and how your work and personal life have reflected that commitment.

Bring your passion to life with specific details – the volunteer work you did in a local elementary school, your previous positions at non-profits with similar missions, the story of how early educational opportunities shaped your own life. Then, explain how all of these pieces come together to make you the best person for this position in this organization right now. Be sure to answer the question of why you are applying for this position now, but be sure to avoid vague explanations such as, "I want to make a difference," or "I'm looking for a job with deeper meaning." Hiring managers hear these explanations all the time, and they won't set you apart from other applicants. You need to provide an answer that shows you understand why this particular organization is different. For example, "I'm looking for an opportunity to apply my operational management skills in an education reform organization that is focused on measurable results."

Finally, be sure that your cover letter demonstrates that you understand what the organization does and how it does it. Use language and specific examples that will resonate with a hiring manager, and show that you understand what makes this organization different from other organizations with similar missions. Keep the following tips in mind:

- *Keep your cover letter brief:* no more than a page and a half.
- *Answer the basics:* Why you, why this organization, and why now?
- *Articulate your passion:* Show how you are connected to the organization's mission.
- *Be specific:* Avoid vague statements such as, "I believe in helping people."

Resume

When hiring managers review your resume they will certainly be looking for specific skills and levels of experience. But again, they will also be looking to see how your commitment to their mission has appeared in your career history. If you don't have a strong history of working for similar organizations or in the same sector, organize your resume so that the core skills required to do the job immediately come to the surface. Make sure your resume makes it clear how your past experiences and the skills you have gained will translate into the position you are applying for. If you have relevant volunteer experience, don't bury it at the end of your resume; bring it forward or set it off in its own section. Think of your resume as not just an opportunity to show what you have already accomplished but also as a chance to show what you can do for the organization in the future.

Interview

Your cover letter and resume will get you in the door, but the interview is your best opportunity to sell yourself as a candidate. There are five keys to interviewing success:

1. **Demonstrate** that you understand the mission and the context in which the organization does its work.
2. **Show** that you understand how the position fits into the overall mission.
3. **Explain** how your skill set and experience have prepared you for the position.
4. **Articulate** your passion for the mission.
5. **Prove** that you will be a good cultural fit.

Below are specific tips on how to achieve all of these interviewing goals.

Demonstrate that you understand the mission and the context in which the organization does its work.

It's critical that you spend time researching the organization before you interview. Hopefully, you will have already learned quite a bit about the organization in preparation for writing your cover letter, but now it's time to dig deeper. You need to be able to show that you have a clear understanding not just of the organization's mission, but how staff and donors talk about the mission, the context in which it does its work, and what sets this organization apart from organizations with similar missions. You can definitely start with reading the organization's Web site, but you'll need to go further. Read up on new stories about the organization. Find out who is on the board and read their bios, and do the same for the executive management team.

Get the annual report and any marketing literature and scrutinize them carefully. What have been the organization's greatest challenges and opportunities during recent years? Also study any financial information that is available, including the organization's 990 tax forms, which you should be able to find on Guidestar (www.guidestar.com). These forms can provide a snapshot of the organization's financial status, which is a valuable clue in understanding where it is and where it's headed. In addition to learning as much as you can about the organization you are interviewing with, you should also do some research on its competitors in order to gain an understanding of the space, or sector that it operates in. Find out who the thought leaders are in that sector, the individuals and organizations are driving change.

Show that you understand how the position fits into the mission.

Using all of the research that you've done and the job description, now you will want to formulate a picture of how the position you are applying for fits into the bigger picture. How will this position further the mission? What skills will be most critical? What specific qualities is the organization looking for? What are the biggest opportunities and challenges that come with this position? You may not know the answer to all of these; in fact, many of them are excellent questions to ask during the interview. But you should demonstrate that you've spent time thinking about these issues.

Explain how your skill set and experience have prepared you for the position.

This is where you'll really do the most "selling" of yourself as a candidate. Be prepared to expand on what you should have introduced in your cover letter – why you are the right person for this position and this organization. Describe exactly how your past experiences have prepared you for success in this role. Talk about the projects you have led, the people you have managed, the training that you

have undertaken – just be specific, and draw a clear line between what you’ve accomplished in the past and what you can accomplish in the future. As you do this, try to frame it all in terms that show you speak the organization’s language. For example, if your research has shown that the organization you’re interviewing with is very concerned with measurable outcomes, be sure to talk about metrics in a way that will resonate with the interviewer.

If the organization refers to the grants it makes as “investments,” be sure you do, too. The goal is to demonstrate how bringing you on board will strengthen the organization’s brand and further its mission. Another way to show your value is to talk about the impact you have had on previous organizations. You can do this by describing innovative policies, procedures, or projects that you developed and implemented. As you talk about your previous experience, be sure to avoid corporate jargon, and don’t assume that the interviewer will know what kind of work your title required. It’s a good idea to come up with a simple sentence that describes the scope of your responsibilities. “As Special Projects Manager I was responsible for implementing and managing new research initiatives.”

Articulate your passion for the mission.

This is another expansion of what was hopefully introduced in your cover letter. But it’s a vital piece of information about your candidacy that must be communicated to the hiring manager and anyone else you interview with. Explain, as specifically as possible, why you are interested in working for the organization and what your connection is to its mission.

Prove that you will be a good cultural fit.

Exploring whether you’d be a good culture fit is just as important for you as it is for the hiring manager. Studies show that most employees leave their positions because of a poor cultural fit with the organization, so making sure that you are a good match should be high on your list of priorities. Your initial research should have given you at least a sense of what the organization is like culturally. Take cues from the organization’s Web site. Look for the clues that tell you what the organization values and how it approaches its mission. What words do they use? How do they describe themselves? Who do they partner with? If you have a sense of these things before the interview you will be in a better position to understand and demonstrate why you would be a good cultural fit.

Negotiating an Offer

It's important to send a strong, consistent message about your candidacy throughout the entire process, including during offer negotiation. The goals at this stage of the process are to have learned enough through your research and interviews so that you will not be overly surprised by the details of an offer and to negotiate in a way that continues to demonstrate your understanding of the organization and your commitment to the mission. This means that your research and interview process should include learning enough about the organization's financial picture and benefits packages that you will at least have a ballpark estimate about what the offer will look like when it arrives. And your understanding of the organizational culture and available resources should be your guide during the negotiation process.

For example, if you've applied for a Deputy Director position and you've studied the organization's 990 form, which shows that the Executive Director makes \$130,000 and the second most senior position makes \$110,000, then you should have a good idea of what you might be offered and how much more you could ask for. The negotiating process is a final opportunity to convince the organization that you will be a positive addition to the team while also making sure that the offer meets your needs. In addition to having realistic expectations about the salary, keep the following in mind:

- *Be flexible.* It's always good to have a salary range in mind, including a firm low end. But if you enter into negotiations saying that you need a certain figure or you won't take the job does not set a good impression about your flexibility or your commitment to the organization. Try to be as flexible with your range as possible.
- *Give options.* If the base salary isn't as high as you'd like it, present some options. Could you get an extra week of vacation? A performance-based bonus? The ability to work a flexible schedule? There are many different factors that go into a compensation package – salary is just one of them.
- *Communicate clearly and honestly.* Many people are uncomfortable talking about money. That's understandable. But it's vital that you be as open and honest as possible about your needs in order to avoid misunderstandings and ensure that both parties leave the negotiating table happy.

Selling yourself as a candidate is a fundamental piece of the job search process. The advice in this article can help you present your best self to any organization and clearly demonstrate why you are the best person for the job.