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Fifteen Ways to Create a Better Entry-level Resume

Fire service resumes can vary from traditional 'business' resumes

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Your impression starts the minute the oral board encounters something related to you. One of the key things you can do to be able to make a positive impression is to have a powerful, attention-grabbing resume that is short, easy to read, and straight to the point.

Many of us probably cringe at the thought of having to provide a resume, or update a resume for an upcoming interview or application process. Producing and keeping your resume updated doesn't have to be that difficult or stressful. A properly prepared resume can distinguish you from other candidates as well as showcase the knowledge, skills, and abilities that make you the best fit for the position.

Basic Resume Tips:

- 1.** Keep it to one page -- unless you are competing for a chief officer position (and you have over 10 years of specific experience to the field that you're applying for) -- you don't have that much that can't be squeezed onto one page. If it can't fit on one page, it probably isn't important enough or relevant enough to be on there. When I took my captain's oral interview, I had a one-page resume. It was tough to squeeze everything on there (and have to leave things out), but I made it work. I received a 100 percent score on my oral interview, so I guess a one-page resume didn't hurt me.
- 2.** A 12-point font size is suggested for text. I've seen ones that are in nine-point and 10-point font (as well as 18-point font). Twelve-point font size is standard for text -- anything smaller and people are going to strain their eyes, anything larger is going to be obnoxious. Usually the people reviewing your resume are not just fresh out of college. They usually have some experience behind their belts and with experience comes declining eye site. How are you going to keep someone's attention if they have to strain to read your writing?
- 3.** Keep it short, sweet, to the point, and leave plenty of open space to distinguish between things you want to stand out. If you're writing more than two to three lines of text in a row, it is going to read like a paragraph. People reviewing resumes usually don't have time to read novels - they want one to two lines that are separated by open space, maybe accented with bullets or other objects, and pleasing to the eyes. Think about it, if you hand out an updated resume when you walk into the room. If you write paragraphs, there is the tendency they will not see key points (because all the words blend together after a while) and that they will miss things. Even if they had the time to review the one you turned in with your application, they usually don't have more than a minute or two to read it - that is why it is important to be short and sweet, making things stick out and be noticeable.
- 4.** Make sure you keep it from being boring -- many resumes are plain, difficult to read, and will put the reader to sleep. Use type sets such as uppercase, sentence case, bold, underline, italics, in addition to just the plain old regular

computer print. Alternating type sets will help the reader distinguish and pick out certain things about you and what you have to offer, while also ensuring that certain things about you are highlighted.

5. If you're not updating your resume at least once a month, you're probably not doing as much as you can to prepare yourself to become a firefighter. Updates can include additional education or training, another relevant certificate, more hours of community service/volunteer time, etc.

6. If you are going to bring a resume to the interview (updated resume or initial resume), I would suggest bringing at least seven resumes with you. I had an entry-level interview once with seven oral board members. Talk about intimidating. Most oral boards usually only have three to five members on them, but how would you feel if you only had five resumes and there were six people in front of you? What are you going to do now? Only pass out five of them and leave one person in the cold? How do you think that person is going to score you? I bet you would be embarrassed and it would potentially make you so nervous that you screwed up that you would not do as well as you should.

7. Do not list "References available upon request." It is a waste of space and I've never had any department ask me for references at the time of application or while you're going through the entry-level process. If they want references, they'll usually ask you as a part of your background investigation paperwork. It might work in the business world, but to me it is one line of text that can be used more wisely.

8. Stick to neutral colors - white, gray, beige, etc. If you want to stand out, having bright colored resume paper is probably not the best way.

9. Don't forget to list your name, address and phone number. A few years ago, we were looking at hiring some new EMT instructors at the college. One excellent candidate turned in his resume (no job application, just a resume as a screening tool). However, when I made an attempt to find a way to contact him to bring him in for an interview, I couldn't locate an address or a phone number. He had just put his name on the top of the resume and went into his qualifications.

The scary part is that he was already a captain at his fire department. The only thing I can assume is that he used the same resume that he used for his captain's promotional exam (even then that is risky because it bucks the normal trend.) That is fine for his fire department because I think they knew how to contact him, but it was not acceptable to me because I did not have a way to contact him. He failed at making a positive first impression. Learn from his mistake.

10. Try to stay away from using abbreviations on your resume. About the only acceptable abbreviations are EMT, CPR, or the State you live in. Why is that? Well what might be an abbreviation of one word might be the abbreviation of another word to someone else. In the medical field, PE can stand for patient exam, pulmonary edema, or pulmonary embolus. Not that you're probably going to list PE on your resume, but I think you get the point. Think about who might read your resume - it might not just be a fire service professional. Folks from the human resources or personnel department might be the ones reading it (or screening it) first or during an oral interview, and you can't expect them to know fire service abbreviations. Also, many departments have a citizen from the community on the oral panel. Do you think you're going to score points if you're talking about things they are not aware of? Also, writing out words can be perceived as being more professional or mature.

11. The only name, street address (2544 Jones Street), zip code, and phone numbers that should be on your resume should be your own! Do not list names of references (I've seen that done) or names of supervisors. You know my

opinion on listing references. As for names of supervisors, that information will be going on the application. Another problem with listing names on your resume is that not everyone you list is going to be well liked.

I realize the oral board is supposed to be objective - not subjective. However, if you list the name of a reference on there that might not be a "quality reference" in the eyes of the evaluator (oh yes, it is a very small world); you put yourself at risk of getting the maximum points. I know that subjectivity is not supposed to occur in the oral board process, but it is almost impossible to eliminate bias and personal opinions in the testing process.

12. If you're going to list e-mail addresses on your resume, avoid ones such as or

OaklandRaidersRule@whatever.com. Oh yes, I've seen many similar ones. I am not here to judge folks on their hobbies, personal lives, or professional sports team choices. I am just offering the suggestion that you might want a more "professional sounding" one such as your first and last name. I know we're supposed to be objective, but put yourself in the shoes of a fire chief reviewing resumes of candidates they plan to hire as firefighters for the next 30 years, representing their community and their department. Just like cars and the clothes we wear can be an extension of our personalities and attitudes, so can email addresses.

I have no problem with the Oakland Raiders. But what if the person reading your resume is a 49'er fan and hates the Raiders? Or what if you are a female on the oral panel reviewing resumes and you see a LadiesMan@yobaby.com. I know we're not supposed to be biased, but can you blame them if they are? Also, for those of you with AOL.com e-mail accounts: if you have a member profile, I would suggest reviewing it to make sure you would not be ashamed if a fire chief that was looking to hire you saw that profile. I make the EMT students at the college provide a resume to me and every now and then, I go check to see if they have a member profile, and there are always a few students that list things that would probably be found to be "unprofessional."

13. Don't list hobbies on your resume. You're not getting hired for your hobbies - you're getting hired for your knowledge, skills, and abilities (in addition to how well you perform throughout the testing process). Nothing says you can't talk about them during the interview, go ahead. To me it is a waste of space on your resume. Also, what might be a "cool" hobby to you (snowboarding, bungee-jumping, motorcycling, jet skiing, etc.) might not be so "cool" to the chief officer reviewing your resume.

Getting back to subjectivity - every fire department has probably experienced folks getting injured off-duty doing some of those "cool" things. The last thing we need is another injury that is just waiting to happen. Chief Officers are usually trained or educated in risk management concepts. Let me see, this candidate likes to jump from planes, race fast vehicles, etc... If they take risks off duty, they might do them on duty..... Don't let people's minds wander - they will go places you don't want them to go.

14. Have somebody else take a look at your resume to proofread it for errors or things that just don't make sense. Remember when you've been staring at your "masterpiece" for a while, changing things, adding things, etc., you are going to get tunnel vision and after a while, you wouldn't even be able to realize you had misspelled your name. Trust me, been there, done that, got the t-shirt. One misspelled word can be enough to have the person reading it convinced that you don't care about the way you present yourself.

15. Last, but not least, make a copy of every resume you ever turn in. You should be making a copy of everything you turn in to a department (application, resume, etc.) and keeping it in a file. Other relevant items to keep are the initial job flyer and any information you obtained in the process. Keeping a copy of your resume can jog your memory when you get that interview four years later (I was actually called by a department I had tested with four years prior, to see if I wanted to be considered for employment). I didn't go to the interview because I had already been hired in a

"dream department." Imagine if I had gone to that interview and they had asked me "What have you done since the time you turned in the original application?" If I hadn't kept a copy of the application, I would have looked pretty stupid. If I had kept copies, I could have been able to say with confidence "Look what I have done since then," to show my motivation and drive towards becoming a firefighter.

Summary

That is about all I have to offer in regards to producing the best resume you can. Use what you feel might benefit you. That first 30 seconds or so when you walk through the door to greet the oral interview panel are some of the most valuable seconds you will ever have to make a first impression. Already having produced a quality resume prior to the interview (and having turned it in with your application) will help set the stage for your entrance into the room since the interview panel usually reviews your application and resume prior to interviewing you. It will also start you out on a good note, thus leaving a positive first impression. Even if you turn in your first resume at the time of oral interview when you walk in the door, or you provide an updated resume at this time, it is still counted as part of your "first impression time."

The bottom line is that you always need to have a resume ready to go at any given time. Keep it on your computer, backed up on disc, so that you can change the objective for every test you take, and be able to easily add the achievements you have accomplished since the last time you updated the resume.

Just remember -- you don't get a second chance to make a first impression!

See author Steve Prziborowski Live at Firehouse World! Quinn will be presenting "Responsibilities of the First-Due Company Officer" and "How to Excel at Promotional Exams - The Fireground Simulation Exercise" at Firehouse World in San Diego, Feb. 28 - March 4.

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