IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT IN THE RESUME AND ITS COVER LETTER

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ABSTRACT: Eighty-one managers read application materials arrayed in a 2 (impression management versus nonimpression management cover letter) × 2 (impression management versus nonimpression management resume) × 2 (high versus low self-monitor) design and completed a survey on their perceptions. Managers rated the impression management cover letter negatively on several perceptions but positively on self-confidence. They rated the impression management resume negatively almost across the board. Implications were discussed in terms of the apparently counterproductive role of impression management in the resume but a limited possible role in the cover letter.

With increased competitiveness in the job market, greater emphasis is being placed on the employment application process, in particular the resume and its accompanying cover letter. Advice on the proper preparation of the resume and cover letter in order to “market” oneself is a popular theme (e.g., Broussard & Brannen, 1986). Because the resume and its cover letter are frequently the first information a potential employer receives about an applicant, popular articles stress creating a good first impression (Wyant & Vice, 1979). Moreover, exaggeration of credentials is at times encouraged and even condoned as appropriate “gamesmanship” (Kiechel, 1982). In other words, applicants are being advised to use impression management (IM)—attempts to control images of one’s competence, motivation, and experience projected toward others (Schlenker, 1980). Current evidence

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is that many applicants are using a variety of IM techniques in the resume: entitlements (taking credit for positive events), dissociating from failure (omitting negative events), describing impressive responsibilities and duties, and self-enhancements (vanity awards) (Broussard & Brannen, 1986; Schlenker, 1980; Vecchio, 1984). In addition, applicants are being advised to present themselves well in the cover letter with such accepted impression management techniques as complimentary other enhancements (flattering comments directed toward ingratiating oneself with the reader), basking in reflected glory (associating with prestigious institutions), and self-presentation (why the applicant is better than other applicants) (Schlenker, 1980; Wyant & Vice, 1979).

Although advice abounds on creating good impressions through the resume and cover letter, there is increasing evidence that the potential employer as the reader of these materials is becoming more discriminating about the information contained within (Broussard & Brannen, 1986; Kiechel, 1982; Vecchio, 1984). Moreover, there is a parallel market in advice about detecting impression management in the resume, such as searching for exaggerated job responsibilities, inflated job titles and salary levels, embellished academic credentials, and attention-getting awards (Broussard & Brannen, 1986). Therefore, it is hypothesized that managers, as typical readers of resume packages, are less favorably inclined toward resumes and cover letters employing impression management techniques.

Self-Monitoring

A considerable literature has arisen around a particular type of impression manager, the high self-monitor (Snyder, 1979). This person is highly perceptive of what the situation defines as correct behavior; i.e., he/she actively searches the environment for cues about what is appropriate in a particular situation and then draws upon a varied behavioral repertoire to produce a maximally effective impression for that situation. The obverse is the low self-monitor who is more attuned to internal cues about what is appropriate and thus produces more consistent behavior over situations.

Although much of the literature focuses upon high self-monitors as the source of impression management attempts, one study has examined the self-monitor as the recipient of such attempts. Jones and Baumeister (1976) found that high self-monitors were less favorably inclined than low self-monitors toward impression management techniques directed toward them. It is therefore hypothesized that readers who are high self-monitors react less positively to IM tactics in the resume and cover letter than do low self-monitors.