

Write A Job Advertisement

Writing job advertisements is a job which managers love to delegate or put off. They think it involves creativity and therefore must be difficult and takes lots of time they don't have. Like everything, those of us who have written lots of advertisements know there is a formula. Once you know how, it's easy.

1. Identify Your Target Audience
2. First Sentence: Enticement
3. Second Sentence: "You'll be..."
4. Third Sentence: "You'll have an opportunity to..."
5. Fourth Sentence: "You'll have..."
6. Fifth Sentence: Call To Action
7. Admin Details

1. Identify Your Target Audience.

Knowing who you want to attract is the most important part of writing an advertisement. You can't hope to entice the kind of people you want if you don't know who they are.

You don't need to be scientific about this - your gut feel will be enough. Ask yourself a series of questions:

- What experience does the ideal candidate have?
- What industries have they been working in?
- What job do they do now?
- Who are they working for now?
- What do they read?
- What are they looking for in their next role?

If you do want to be more scientific about it, you can go through the list of questions with the last few people that have been hired into the role, and gather a couple of additional perspectives. Assuming that it's your boss that's hiring, your understanding of the role and the need will probably be enough.

The most important question is the last one, but it's almost impossible to get to without asking yourself the others. So, suppose we need a junior software engineer. What would the answers be?

What experience does the ideal candidate have?

An IT based degree, preferably one that included programming in the language we're using or one similar.

Perhaps a year or two out of college, or someone who has had part-time roles involving programming. Experience at a large corporate would be useful.

What industries have they been working in?

Preferably Telecoms - but since we're asking for someone junior it's not that important.

What job do they do now?

Probably a junior support role or part-time/ad hoc programming.

Who are they working for now?

Preferably one of the large corporate telecoms companies which are our competitors. Again, for junior candidates, it's not essential.

What do they read?

Websites and magazines. I doubt they've got to the stage of reading the Wall Street Journal every day.

What are they looking for in their next role?

Progression. This person wants to be in a large corporate for the career ladder. They are ambitious, but conservative.

As you work through the questions, you build a picture of the person in your mind. Although it's not relevant, I see this person living with their Mom and Dad or in a slightly student-like apartment share. What they really want is enough money to party and vacation, and pretend to save for a house deposit.

Caution - we spend a lot of time here building up a picture of the person we're trying to attract. We MUST NOT use that as part of the screening process. There is a danger that we'll get a resume from a 40-year old career changer, and automatically discard the resume because it doesn't fit the mental picture we have. This picture is only for the time you need it - when you write the advertisement. After that, put it in your mental trash can.

2. First Sentence: Enticement.

Now we know who we are attracting, we can begin to write. In all good advertising, the first thing you see or read has to be the attractor. It has to be compelling enough to make the reader read on. So the first sentence is always an 'enticement'.

Questions work really well here - the reader almost automatically answers positively, and then carries on reading.

For example:

"Want to see the world?" "Want to be on the fast-track to software management?"

"Want to feel like you're giving back?"

"Want a change of scene?"

"Want to take our company to the 22nd century?"

"Want to be part of a global delivery system?"

The question needs to be related to one of the things you have identified as being important to your ideal candidate.

Since we've identified that our candidates are ambitious, asking if they want to be on the fast-track to software management is likely to get them reading on. If we ask them "want to see the world?" they'll probably be more half-hearted. It's worked for the Navy for years though - because they're trying to attract someone different - someone without strong family ties who wants to have an adventure.

This sentence and the fourth have to be strongest. Whatever your question is, it needs to be something which really appeals to your target audience.

3. Second Sentence: "You'll be..."

This sentence (or two, depending how much space you have) is where you describe the role. Beginning 'You'll be' is important. Don't try and start it any other way. (Yes, this does seem terribly formulaic - but remember the candidate is unlikely to see all your advertisements all in one go on a single page, so they won't notice).

Why do we start 'You'll be'? Because the reader puts themselves in the position mentally. 'You'll be' makes them think of themselves in the job. Realtors know that they are close to selling a house when the buyers start imagining their furniture in it and their lives working from that house. The same applies here. If you can get the candidate to imagine himself in the role, you've made a big step towards having him as an employee.

What we don't want to do here is go overboard. Don't list every single activity this person will be doing. Think of those activities which will be most attractive to her and list those.

This is where a job description differs from a job advertisement. An advertisement for a job, like an advertisement for any product or service emphasizes the good parts. Nobody told you your iPad would take 6 hours to charge did they? They just showed you the shiny pictures. In the same way, you don't want to tell the candidates about the boring reporting they have to do, only about the exciting boundaries they will be breaking.

For example: You'll be responsible for the programming behind our breakthrough product, working with our architects to understand the overall plan and then programming discrete sections, before working with our quality staff to ensure the code quality standards are met.

This is science not art. Start your sentence with 'you'll be' and then describe the responsibilities in broad brushstrokes. Make it sound appealing to the type of person you're looking for. We know that our ambitious junior wants to feel like they are part of the whole project, even though they'll be programming the smallest blocks and then handing them over. By describing the whole lifecycle and how they fit in, we appeal to what they are looking for.

4. Third Sentence: "You'll have an opportunity to..."

In this sentence you take the reader to the future with you.

Think about what they would hope to be doing in six months, or what benefits or training you'd think they'd like. Don't lie.

We're not going to promise something that'll never happen, but we do want to make it clear to them that the thing they want, will be forthcoming in time.

Our ambitious junior wants the opportunity to get lots of training and work on exciting projects. A senior manager wants the opportunity to influence the strategic direction of the company or division. A teacher wants the opportunity to work with motivated students and parents on advanced learning. A secretary wants the opportunity to keep his IT skills updated and to make a difference to the company through his support. A project manager wants the opportunity to work on more exciting or bigger projects. A safety manager wants the opportunity to have more influence and take responsibility for more staff's safety. A scientist wants the opportunity to work on breakthrough science.

What do you have to offer that your ideal candidate would want? You can use this to help your

candidates self-select out as well as in. I once recruited for relatively difficult to fill roles in a very difficult location. Most of the ideal candidates were relatively junior and town-based. The role was in the middle of the countryside. "You'll have the opportunity to work in a peaceful, country setting" attracted those candidates who liked to be outdoors, and stopped those who wanted a thriving nightlife applying. That meant less offers refused later on.

5. Fourth Sentence: "About You..."

This is the point where you tell the candidate what they need to have in order to be successful in your recruitment process.

Again, we don't want to go overboard here. Don't make this the long list of absolutely everything you want to see in the ideal candidate. (And don't make the mistake of asking for ten years experience in a technology that has only existed for five).

Choose your top four or five attributes and list those.

Remember, this isn't the job description. The candidate will need to see the full job description before they apply, but not now. Recruitment is a standard sales funnel. At this point you need as many people to rule themselves in as possible, so that you have maximum choice at the end of the process.

For example: "You'll have a degree in an IT related subject, with some courses in programming, some work experience in a programming or related role, and preferably some experience of a large corporate, ideally in Telecoms".

Yes, it's just a list. The intention is that the reader is excited by the first part of the advertisement, and they read this sentence and say to themselves: "Yep, got that, yep, that's me, yep, I can do that".

6. Fifth Sentence: Call To Action.

A call to action is the final part of an advertisement that asks you do to something. What do you want your candidates to do now? Should they go to your website to read the full job description? Should they apply? Should they call to discuss the role? Should they send their resume?

In many cases this will be dictated by your recruitment process. If you do have the chance to decide for yourself, think again about your ideal candidates. Senior managers are much more likely to want an informal chat before formally applying than juniors. If you think the advertisement will get a lot of responses, ask for resumes and a cover letter detailing why they think they are an appropriate candidate.

Make the method of contact work equally well for you and the candidate.

If you ask them to email responses - set up a new email address which you can put an autoresponder on. Candidates hate sending their emails to blackholes and getting no response, and that will cause lots of annoying phone calls for your team. (On the other hand, as a candidate calling 'to make sure you received my application' is a great way of being able to talk to someone at the company and get more information).

7. Admin Details.

Don't forget to put the relevant contact details on the advertisement. And, check them at least twice to make sure any contact numbers and reference numbers are right. Not that we learnt that the hard way. Again, this will often be dictated by your recruitment process, but if you do have leeway, think about what works for you AND the candidates.

Wrap Up

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Following our formula, our advertisement sounds like this:

Want to be on the fast track to software management?

In this role, you'll be responsible for the programming behind our breakthrough product, working with our architects to understand the overall plan and then programming discrete sections, before working with our quality staff to ensure the code quality standards are met. You'll have the opportunity to move to our leading edge projects as they rollout and to attend 3 training courses per year.

You'll have a degree in an IT related subject, with some courses in programming, some work experience in a programming or related role, and preferably some experience of a large corporate, ideally in Telecoms.

Sendyourresumetoresumes@ourcompany.com with the reference 3942 in the subject line

Writing job advertisements looks like art, but it's really science.

Following this formula, you can knock one out in 15 minutes and be a hero for your manager, who likely thinks it's a difficult, creative job.