

## Your Numbers Don't Add Up

*Misrepresenting facts is a key cause for losing the job opportunity. It's all a numbers game when it comes to selling yourself on the resume.*

by Robert Meier

Competition for that once-in-a-lifetime opportunity often tempts job seekers to inflate their results to attract the hiring manager, but watch out...one of the most damaging decisions you can make is misusing numbers in your resume. In fact, it's become so common for job seekers to use phony statistics that recruiters have become skeptical. And if they're not totally convinced, it's likely they will dismiss your accomplishments as soon as they see them. Most job seekers think a typo in their resume is a greater threat to winning the job offer than embellishing their accomplishments. Not so. Odd-looking numbers raise red flags much quicker than a grammatical faux pas, and once a flag is raised—game over.

### Big Numbers Can Lead to Bigger Problems

Statistical claims are important to defining value, but professionals can sink their chance of winning an interview by using confusing or outrageous numbers. Everyone knows that building a positive impression in this difficult job market takes awesome accomplishments. They realize, like professional baseball players, they need to put up big numbers to stay employed. It's all in the stats they're told, i.e. the bottom line, the ROI, the profits. It's this push for outlandishly big results that's the root cause of bad numbers. Although it's true that percentages and quantities make hiring managers take notice and stunning statistics can elevate your value, but embellishing is just a fancy word for lying. Don't kid yourself, hiring managers are so sensitized to this problem that even a hint of fiction will cause them to trash the candidate rather than risk their reputation on someone they may have doubts about.

To make sense of your numbers, don't make these mistakes.

**First**, don't be a victim of the *benign accident*. This is where a candidate meant something else when they said they grew revenues by 1,000 % in 30 days.

**Secondly**, don't buy into the lie that goes like this: Candidate X says to himself, well my company recently closed, so really it doesn't matter what I say because they can't confirm the facts.

You'd be surprised how obvious it is to spot someone misrepresenting his or her accomplishments. Either validate your numbers or don't use them. Better yet, use numbers you can confirm. The secret to using numbers properly is to be conservative enough so that you can look an interviewer in the eye with complete confidence that your statistics are valid. Your confidence will often carry the day and help a reviewer trust you.

The following real-life example is not so much misrepresenting a result as it is using a result that may not make any sense to the reader.

**Example #1** Susan B. is an impressive sales professional, who is a Business Development Manager (BDM) for a business center. In talking with her I learned the achievement she was most proud of was that she had "increased price efficiency of current clients from 69% to 90% in a 5 month period."

**Problem** Yet, when I showed that information to others in her field, no one understood what she meant by "price efficiency."

When I met again with Susan to rewrite her resume, I brought up her "efficiency" statement and learned that she

was a better negotiator than anybody else in the company. When she signed a new client for office space, she negotiated the price based on square footage, office amenities and length of contract. She excelled in getting the customer's signature on the dotted line. While other BDMs quickly capitulated to win business, she was able to convince the client to buy without going below 90% of list price (which is what she meant by price efficiency).

So her resume rewrite highlighted those abilities as follows:

*"To maximize profits, I close deals within 10% of list price, the current corporate standard is 69% of list, the difference of closing deals at 90% have increased gross profit to my company by \$5 million during the past 5 years."*

Her original statistics were valid but unclear. She thought she would explain price efficiency in the interview. She needed to clearly communicate her value in her resume first, in a way that didn't take extra explanation. Not only was the clearer explanation of the 90% price efficiency important, but the bottom line impact to her company was that \$5 million. Now she could be pre-sold before she ever went to the interview.

Another way to blow the numbers game is to apply a statistic to the wrong fact.

**Example #2** Joe, is a genius. By age 28 he was a Product Manager for a Baby Bell's DSL high-speed Internet service. When we met, he had job-hopped three new positions between that job and his most recent role which is Director of Marketing for a smaller, privately held communications company.

## **Business Marketing Association**

What Joe was most proud of was increasing brand awareness 376% in 12 months. Great, right? Nearly quadrupled his company's brand awareness in a year. Only problem, defining brand awareness is difficult even for major corporations with large marketing departments. To say that you increased brand awareness 376% for a small, privately held company that no-one has heard of, is a little like claiming that my apple is 20% more crunchy than your apple, interesting, but hard to prove.

Even though brand management, brand extensions, and brand awareness are important issues to corporate America, you can't use hot ideas as magical key words to open the door of opportunity. When the senior vice president of marketing asked Joe what he did to expand his company's brand awareness he learned that Joe was able to get eight articles published in trade journals and newspapers, an increase from the company's two previous press mentions. He suggested that was brand awareness. Joe didn't mean to cross his wires between brand awareness and press mentions (which he did quadruple), he just didn't know what was the right thing to call his success, so he made a classic mistake and used an exaggerated number to define an accomplishment.

### **What you can do**

Provide enough content in the resume to explain your accomplishments clearly.

Have someone read the resume and confirm that it is perfectly clear. Don't assume that you're speaking to a knowledgeable audience that understands what you mean. Your resume might be reviewed by someone who refers the "keepers" to a boss, so using esoteric jargon can easily confuse them.

Use honest numbers and validate your claims with enough substantiating information that the reviewer believes your statements.

At the end of the day, your numbers will either sell or sink your chances of winning the job offer. Don't be afraid to use them liberally, just remember they can't be over the top fabrications or vague generalizations. They must have the weight of validity that is the result of explaining how you arrived at your results. ■

*Robert Wm. Meier is President of Absolute Career Services and the author of the World's Greatest Resumes. He has helped more than 4,000 professionals climb the ladder of success. He can be reached at 312-222-9966 or at [jobcatcher1@qwest.net](mailto:jobcatcher1@qwest.net).*