

Handling a Rejection

In every job search, a little rain must fall. Not every interview will lead to a job offer. In fact, you will always have more “turn-downs” than you will offers. Sometimes you won't want a job offer from a given employer. And sometimes you will, and it won't materialize. In those cases, there are a couple of things you can do to turn those lemons into lemonade.

Suppose you've been interviewing for your dream job, an international market-research position at XYZ, a hot athletic equipment company. You would run focus groups, show video clips of ad mock-ups featuring various sports idols, and test reactions to the ad concepts. The job would make excellent use of your language skills in French and German, appeal to your interest in psychology, and provide travel opportunities and a liberal expense account. You know that at least 20 people have interviewed for this position, but you've handled yourself well, been complimented on your presentation, and been given reason to believe that an offer is forthcoming. You await the mail each day with great anticipation. Soon, the letter comes... but the contents are crushing:

Thank you for taking part in the interview process for the market-research position in the International Marketing department. Your credentials are impressive and you presented yourself well. Unfortunately, we have decided to hire another well-qualified individual for this position and therefore cannot make an offer to you at this time. We will keep your resume on file.

What would you do in this circumstance? Would you cry? Would you continue your job search and try to forget about your disappointment? (Maybe.) Or maybe you'd do the following:

Dear Ms. Chen:

Thank you so much for the opportunity to interview with you and your team at XYZ Company.

I learned a great deal from meeting with you and was hopeful that I might be able to become a member of your group and a key contributor in helping you reach your goals. I'm confident that I could have delivered exactly what you need, but I also understand that you have made a thoughtful decision in selecting another person.

While I know you are quite busy, I would love to hear any feedback you have about my performance in my interview or my offerings as a candidate. I am always looking to improve and any insight you can provide would be quite helpful.

*Sincerely,
Joe Smith*

What does such a letter say about Joe? Most people would see him as:

- Polite and gracious, even when disappointed
- Accepting of Ms. Chen's decision (or at least not argumentative)
- Persistent in striving for his goals
- Open to suggestions
- Eager to learn from someone she respects
- Confident, yet willing to learn
- Articulate

All these attributes would theoretically make Joe a valuable employee, especially in a high-profile marketing position. Unfortunately, the position is already gone, so why bother? Here's why:

Shortly after receiving Joe's letter, Ms. Chen gets an unpleasant call. The call begins: "Ms. Chen, this is a very difficult call for me to make." As it happens, the candidate hired instead of Joe has received an offer for another opportunity, the perfect opportunity, the opportunity that he just couldn't turn down. Or perhaps her current boss made her a counter-offer that was too good to be true. Bottom line: He won't be coming to work for Ms. Chen.

Now Ms. Chen is on the spot. Her market research is due to begin next week and she has no one to send. Her options? Begin interviewing all over again or try to figure out which of the other 19 candidates she might consider again after having rejected all of them. No one but Joe wrote a thank-you note after being rejected or made it so easy for her to get back in touch. All Ms. Chen has to do is pick up the phone and agree to see Joe again, and tomorrow would actually be the most convenient day. By Wednesday night, guess who's on his way to Europe?

Is this for real? Count on it. Even if the recipient of the original offer didn't back out, Joe would be top-of-mind for the next relevant position to open up. According to a survey of career counselors, one-third of well-written thank-you notes for a job turn-down have resulted in a job offer into the same position, a lead into another position with the same company, or a lead on a position elsewhere, usually with a laudatory introduction from the person making the referral.

If you can somehow show that you are likable, can work under many different situations, and won't crack during a crisis, you can win positions over individuals who may have some advantage in knowledge or experience. A follow-up note like Joe's is one of a number of ways to demonstrate such qualities.

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