

## **A Professional Bio / Executive CV can Profile Your Strengths**

We've all heard the analogy: Conducting a job search is like marketing and selling a product -- with you as the product. This viewpoint suggests that the best way to market yourself is to go through the time-honoured sales sequence.

This means defining the features and benefits of your product, pinpointing the attributes that distinguish you from competitive brands. You next must identify, target and penetrate receptive markets. Qualifying leads, winning over the buyer and overcoming objections come after that. Finally, you close the sale. Selling yourself is like selling a PC, wide-body airliner or time-share condo in the Caribbean, only the product's purchase price includes stock options, a car-rental allowance and a 401(k).

Your "sales brochure" is, of course, your Executive CV / Resume. Or is it? Is the classic reverse-chronology Executive CV / Resume (or its step-sibling, the functional Executive CV / Resume) always the most effective vehicle for pitching your virtues to appropriate purchasers?

Conventional wisdom dictates that a conventional Executive CV / Resume is the appropriate tool to use in most cases. This is because employers want to match skills with job requirements and feel more comfortable if the "product information" is presented in a conventional format. Indeed, attempts to make your brochure stick out from the crowd -- by using purple paper, Olde English font or a photo of your face superimposed on Arnold Schwarzenegger's body -- usually help it only to stick out of the wastebasket.

In some situations, though, a professional biography may work better than a conventional Executive CV / Resume. It also can serve as a useful supplement to your other self-marketing materials. For instance, a well-written bio is a powerful tool if you're developing a consulting practice, marketing yourself as a provider of professional services, being considered for an opening on a board of directors or as a leader of a professional association. This document also can add credibility to business proposals, funding requests or investment solicitations and tout your credentials on the Internet or as a keynote speakers.

### **A Different Look**

Biographies do not look like Executive CVs/ Resumes. That's the idea: Their value comes partly from sending the message, "This isn't a conventional CV / Resume ! Read it differently!"

Bios are written in complete English sentences in the third person, unlike a Executive CV / Resume, which is written in an abbreviated first-person style (on a CV / Resume, "managed company" stands for "I managed the company"). Bios tend to be written more tightly than a Executive CV / Resume. They often comprise only a single page and emphasize selected roles and achievements rather than offering an inventory of your entire career.

Well-written bios have a "voice." As pitch-pieces, they make a targeted, persuasive argument about what to think about you. This is a departure from conventional CV /

Resumes, which should come across as dispassionate factual recitations that allow readers to draw their own (hopefully inescapable) conclusion.

A biography repeats your name throughout, making readers feel they know you on a first-name basis. By its very nature, this document can get away with using more stirring language than is appropriate for a Executive CV / Resume. As Carleen McKay, a consultant with Right Management Consultants in Atlanta, notes, "A good biography is a factual document, a great bio is a factual and creative document and an exceptional bio is a factual, creative and memorable document."

That said, the tone of your bio shouldn't cross the line from being confident and positive to inflated puffery, unsupported self-praise or a wowie-zowie sales pitch. It should never compromise your image of professionalism merely to grab a reader's attention.

### The "Buy Me" Biography

If you're starting a consulting or professional services practice, a bio can help you market yourself by focusing on the qualities and traits most relevant to your "buyers." For consultants' biographies, the lead paragraph should emphasize how their expertise and experience can address a specific need for a particular potential client:

To boards, executives and senior management or rapid-growth companies requiring expert assistance with evaluating and managing the forces that drive organizational performance, Steve Hamilton brings the strategic focus and mature business judgment gained during two decades of diverse CEO experience with a variety of entrepreneurial, high-technology and market-making businesses.

The first paragraph also can include areas of particular knowledge or technical expertise. You may want to list three to five of them using bullets, but avoid writing a lengthy laundry list or it may seem that you're trying to be all things to all people. It's also important that your "set-up" paragraph describe functional areas of competency in terms that your audience understands, e.g., corporate finance, human-resources development, compliance/risk management, sales and marketing management or entrepreneurial business development.

At all costs, avoid making soft generalities, such as "a real people person," "a proven problem solver" or "a woman who can get the job done." Such clichés leave readers grasping and gasping: What people? What kind of problems? What job? Memorable bios describe behaviours / behaviours and the "deliverables" those behaviours/ behaviours produce. Try to keep self-congratulatory adjectives and adverbs to a minimum. Use action verbs -- achieved, built, conceived, developed, engineered, etc. -- and the active voice.

The remainder of your biography should demonstrate that your initial "hook" paragraph isn't just hot air. Subsequent paragraphs should address prospective clients' predictable questions and concerns:

Who has trusted you before? Anyone I know or respect (whether a person or a company)?

What were the stakes? That is, how important, complex or sophisticated were the things you were trusted with?

What kinds of deliverables and outcomes have you produced in the past?

What evidence is there that you possess -- or can quickly acquire -- requisite technical skills for dealing with my needs and priorities? (This will include your educational credentials).

The best way to write a consulting-type bio is to put yourself in the shoes of the potential buyer, then ask yourself the kinds of questions they'd ask to make sure they aren't hiring an empty suit. Since it's assumed that your most recent role or achievement represents your highest level of capability (after all, we're supposed to get better with age), your second paragraph should include your highest, greatest and/or most recent achievement. Ms. McKay calls this the "wow factor" or the reason the reader might think, "OK, I get it. I'm impressed."

Later paragraphs -- not too many, since it's best not to overload the bus -- can summarize your career progression, breadth and depth of experience and perhaps a few major accomplishments. Don't go overboard with detail or elaborate too much, though. Strong bios are written succinctly and selectively highlight your strengths. They're a page long, printed in 12- or 14-point type and include white space, bullets, attractive formats and -- selectively -- italics for readability.

The "Here-I-Am" Professional Profile

A more restrained, matter-of-fact professional profile highlighting and summarizing the achievements of a long, diverse career is appropriate for executives conducting job searches or seeking election to a board of directors or the leadership of a professional association. Executives at this level are less likely to participate in preliminary screenings designed to narrow down many candidates to a few, a process that lends itself to the more scannable CV / Resume.

Instead you may be introduced by an executive recruiter or recommended by a networking contact. With the preliminaries taken care of, executive bios are excellent presentation tools. They're ideal in situations where they're assured thorough consideration by interested readers, perhaps after a positive initial meeting. In this case, the bio is "left behind" for others to read in preparation for future discussions.

When executive search consultants present qualified candidates to clients, they often rewrite the candidates' Executive CVs / Resumes into third-person biographies. Job seekers who anticipate this need and provide headhunters with biographies in addition to their Executive CV / Resumes may save search consultants time and effort -- and win brownie points in the process.

The Introduction Bio

A variation of the biography theme is the "shortie" -- the briefest, tightest set of hooks you can throw into the fishpond. Such a bio may be a "product summary" consisting of only a few paragraphs.

These are helpful if you're being introduced as a convention speaker, recognized authority on "Nightline" or seminar instructor. The point here isn't to summarize all your many virtues. It's to hit readers with a few powerful, succinct data points that arouse attention, command respect and get you remembered. This may mean referring to only one or two singular accomplishments:

"With us tonight is Paul Revere, whose midnight ride at life-threatening risk saved the colonies from defeat and set the stage for democracy as we know it."

Prestigious educational credentials are valuable and should be cited earlier in a short-form bio than in other bios. In a longer form of self-presentation, where you went to school 30 years ago is less relevant than what you accomplished in your career thereafter. In a shortie, however, your education is a shorthand indicator of how smart you are.

Having laboured / labored on content, don't throw your strong impression away on indifferent presentation. Laser-print your document on high-quality watermarked paper stock. Use a professional-looking type face (Times Roman or equivalent is good; sans serif fonts are harder to read). Use wide margins and white space so your presentation has "air." Don't forget to include contact information; many executives put this information at the bottom of the page so the document doesn't resemble a conventional Executive CV / Resume.

Other Bio Benefits

Besides the self-marketing benefits of a bio, an advantage to writing this document is the actual writing of it. The process of thinking through, prioritizing, characterizing and expressing your career profile forces you to review everything you know about yourself -- and make it explicit. As you write, you see and log this vision of yourself into active, articulate memory. That done, you can retrieve it when you want and trot it out either with your pen, word-processor or your mouth. Please contact me if you would like me to write your Executive Bio.

This article was written by Douglas B. Richardson that appeared originally in Dow Jones' National Business Employment Weekly (now Dow Jones' online Career Journal)."  
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