

4.4: Selling U - Selling Your Personal Brand Ethically—Résumés and References

Learning Objectives

- Learn about the ethics of your résumé.
- Understand how to ask references to speak honestly on your behalf.

You've been asked to submit your résumé because your roommate knows someone in the marketing department at a major national food company. You really want this job, but you are concerned that you don't really have the qualifications yet. As you work on your résumé, you exercise your creativity: "cashier" becomes "marketing representative." You add to your skills "management of personnel"—of course, you don't have any management experience, but you just know you'll be good at it. By the time you've finished, you are surprised to realize that, looking at your résumé, you don't recognize yourself. Maybe this truth-stretching exercise wasn't such a good idea.

Behaving in an ethical fashion throughout the hiring process only strengthens your personal brand—and that's just good business.

Selling Yourself versus Stretching the Truth about Your Background and Experience

When you create your résumé, you are selling yourself to potential employers; where do you draw the line between putting your best foot forward and stretching the truth past the breaking point? The difference between "attended Pacific Coast Baptist College" and "received degrees in theology and psychology from Pacific Coast Baptist College" can be the difference between a successful tenure and an embarrassing resignation, as former RadioShack CEO David Edmondson discovered in 2006. Associated Press, "RadioShack CEO Resigns amid Resume Questions," *USA Today*, February 20, 2006, www.usatoday.com/money/industries/retail/2006-02-20-radioshack-ceo_x.htm (accessed February 14, 2010). Edmondson, by claiming that he had earned degrees he had not (and, in one case, a degree not even offered by the college), set the stage for the embarrassing scandal that cost him his job. It can be tempting to gamble on the likelihood that an employer won't do a background check—but even if you get away with a fib once or twice, it's not something you should bet on for your entire career. Social networking will out you. The Internet has led to professional networks that are incredibly far reaching; your boss may have a connection on LinkedIn to a manager at the company you pretend to have interned for. And, of course, lying on your résumé is unethical; you should sell *yourself*, not an exaggerated version of yourself.

Your experiences as a waitress, cashier, retail store salesperson, babysitter, or any other part-time or summer job can be very valuable on your résumé. Being able to demonstrate that you can multitask under pressure, resolve problems quickly to customers' satisfaction, be responsible, or increase sales are the types of skills that prospective employers are looking for from entry-level employees. Use your experience to tell a story about what makes you different and delivers value to your prospective employer. For example, if you want to pursue a career in finance, your experience handling money and balancing the cash drawer at the end of the day is important to highlight on your résumé. It's also a good idea to put your most important and relevant internships or jobs first on your résumé rather than adhering to the traditional chronological order. Since you are just beginning your career, your most important jobs can be listed first. When you gain more experience, it's better to use the chronological format. The bottom line is that you have a brand story to tell on your résumé; no matter what your background, you don't need to stretch the truth.

Prospective employers want to see evidence that you are hardworking and have done things to distinguish yourself by holding part-time jobs, completing internships, participating in professional organizations, performing community service, and gaining other experiences. But one thing to remember about entry-level positions in virtually every industry is that none of the hiring companies expects you to come in and do the job from day one. The company will train you to do the job it wants done. That doesn't mean that you won't be asked to "jump in" and do things, because you will. But companies don't expect you to have skills and experience that you will have after a few years of working. So use your résumé to sell yourself in an honest but compelling way.

Asking References to Speak about Your Personal Brand

References, simply put, are people you can rely on to speak on your behalf; they come in two flavors, personal and professional. **Personal references** are people like aunts or family friends—**professional references** are by far the more important and are usually supervisors, professors, or managers. While some prospective employers may accept personal references, you should have at least three **professional references** available if a prospective employer asks for them.

You might be wondering what employers do when they receive your references. This video is helpful to understand exactly what an employer may ask one of your references.

When choosing references, be sure that the people you have in mind have good things to say about you. It's a good idea to keep in touch with your former boss from your internship or summer job. People with whom you have had a good working relationship can be excellent references. It's always best to contact someone whom you would like to be a reference in person or on the phone. That way you will be able to let them know exactly how much you respect her, and it will give you an opportunity to cement your professional relationship. If she shows any kind of hesitation, you may not want to use her as a reference.

When you speak to a prospective reference, be professional and be specific. Here's an example of a conversation you might have with a professor whom you are asking to be a reference. If you are asking a professor, it's best to make an appointment or stop by his office.

You:	Dr. Feng, I wanted to stop by and give you an update on my job search.
Dr. Feng:	Great. I would like to hear about what companies you are interested in.
You:	Well, I've been trying to get a sales position at one of the pharmaceutical companies in the city. I think that's what I'd like to do since I enjoy sales and I am very interested in science and medicine. So I've sent my cover letter and résumé to all the pharmaceutical companies, and I have a second interview with Ainion Pharmaceuticals next Thursday. I was wondering if you would be a reference for me. They are looking for a sales assistant—someone who is organized, analytical, good with follow-up, and is a creative thinker. I thought that you might be able to speak about my work for the research practicum. I think it's a great example of my work ethic and drive as well as my attention to detail and ability to solve problems creatively.
Dr. Feng:	I would be happy to speak on your behalf. It sounds like the position could be a good fit for your skills. I'll let you know when someone from the company contacts me.
You:	Dr. Feng, thank you very much. I really appreciate all that you have done to help me start my career. I'll let you know how the interview goes on Thursday.

Once you know whom you'd like for your references, *ask them*. This is not a situation in which you want to surprise people. Instead, talk with each person; you should personally speak with each person, preferably in person or by phone as opposed to by e-mail. (By all means, avoid the group e-mail requesting references.) Explain what the job is that you are applying for and ask for her permission to list her as a reference. Always personally thank each of your references, even if you don't get the job. Express your gratitude—preferably in a handwritten note, but you must at least send an e-mail and let them know how things turned out. Don't feel as if you let down your references if you didn't get the job. Each of your references was in your situation at one point in time, and she didn't get an offer from every job interview. Stay positive and keep in touch with your references. They will appreciate it, and you will keep your professional network strong.

If your potential employer wants references, he or she will ask for them; you should have them already prepared, but they should *not* be listed on your résumé.

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Reference Checks

When you are asked to provide references, you will need to provide for each reference: full name, mailing address, phone number, e-mail address, employer, job title, e-mail address, and relationship to you. Have the information collected in a

professional document (see Figure 4.4.4). Remember to get someone’s permission before listing him or her as a reference *every time*; the fact that your internship supervisor was willing to be a reference two years ago doesn’t mean that you can take his assent for granted in the future. Your references are chosen to be advocates for you—in return for their generosity of spirit, do them the courtesy of asking whether they are still willing to speak well of you.

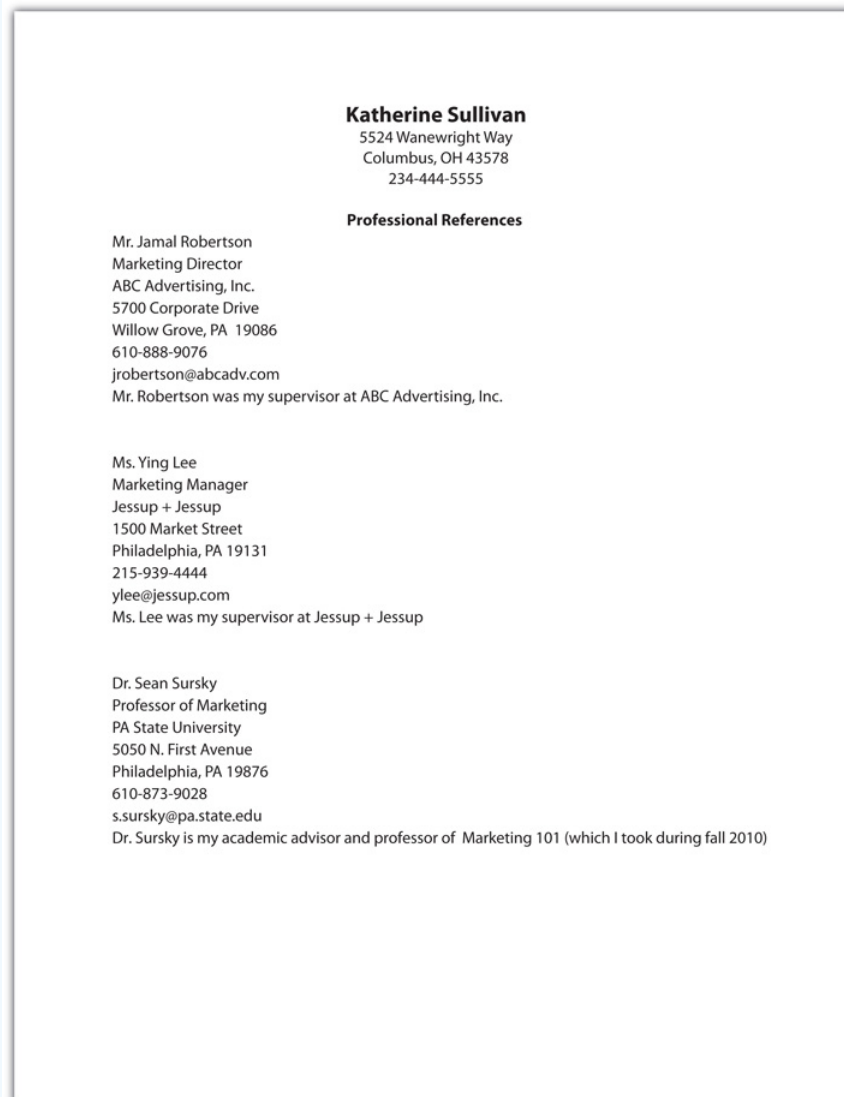


Figure 4.4.4: Sample References

Letters of Recommendation

As you go through classes and internships, collect **letters of recommendation** for your portfolio; such letters demonstrate that people think highly of you. When you finish a class in which you did well, ask your professor for a letter of recommendation. When you finish an internship, ask your supervisor. Not only will these letters demonstrate your credibility, they will help to build your confidence. It’s a good idea to ask each of your references to write a letter of recommendation for you. That way you can bring the letters to your interview to demonstrate the support you have from professionals. This video gives you more insight into using letter of recommendation in addition to your list of references.



Letters of Recommendation. Letters of recommendation can help sell your personal brand. Source: CollegeGrad.com

Don't hesitate to reread your letters after you've had a career setback. If you're going to effectively sell yourself, you need to believe in your personal brand. A reminder that Dr. Messimer thinks that you're awesome could be just the pick-me-up you need in order to dust yourself off and reenter the job market with aplomb.

Key Takeaways

- Lying on your résumé is not ethical and can have catastrophic consequences for your career.
- It is in your best interests to market yourself on your résumé—list your internships first, then your jobs, including any “nonprofessional” jobs that are important to the history of your personal brand.
- **Personal references** are family and friends; **professional references** are people whom you have worked with, and are vastly more important.
- Have at least three professional references available. Present your references only if asked for them; do not include them on your résumé.
- Speak to each of your references before you provide their name and contact information to a prospective employer. Get their permission, thank them, and let them know how things worked out.
- **Letters of recommendation** are important testaments to your character and abilities; when you finish an internship or a class, ask your supervisor or professor for a letter of recommendation. Letters of recommendation are excellent to present with your list of references.

? Exercise 4.4.1

1. Identify three people you could potentially use as professional references. Create a references sheet using the information for these people.
2. Ask one of your former supervisors or a professor to write a letter of recommendation for you.

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