Ten Must-Do Job-Search Tips for 2014 Grads

Super-specific advice on how to research, network, and rehearse your way to the head of the job-hunting pack
By Liz Ryan

This is not the easiest time to be graduating from school: The job market, while showing signs of life, remains tepid compared to prerecession activity levels. New grads need to focus intently on clarifying their job search direction, getting branded, and winning a hiring manager's attention.

We've put together our Top 10 to-do-now job-search tips for people who are completing an academic program this spring and hoping to convert their sheepskins into paying gigs. Don't wait. Start ticking our Top 10 tips off your to-do list now.

1. Choose a Direction, or Two, or Three The biggest job-search mistake new grads make is to hit the market without a clear direction. Let's say your new degree is in marketing. Do you want to do marketing for a consumer products firm or an accounting firm? I know, I know—you'll take any job you can get. Still, employers need to see direction and focus. Choose two or three job-search "prongs" that meet our three-way job-search direction test. (Would you enjoy the work? Does the career direction make use of your talents? Are there jobs available?) Then focus your search on those few areas, avoiding the "spray and pray" approach that frustrates so many hopeful new grads.

2. Customize Your Resumés It's fine to construct more than one resumé, which you'll need to do if you settle on more than one job-search prong. If you choose three areas of focus (consumer products marketing, professional services marketing, and health-care marketing, for example) you'll need a dedicated version of your resumé for each prong. Each resumé will brand you as a great hire in a particular focus area, in three ways. First, the resumé summary at the top of the document will tell the reader why you're interested in the field and why you're a great choice for it. Second, the stories you choose to highlight in your resumé bullets will relate specifically to the prong you've selected for that resumé. Finally, your descriptions of each role (what we call "framing the role") will emphasize the aspects of each job you've held, even part-time ones, that are most relevant to the prong in question.

3. Use Our Examples Marissa is a new grad who is following three avenues in her job search (consumer products marketing, professional-services marketing, and health-care marketing). Here are Marissa's three resumé summaries, each focused on a specific job-search prong:
Consumer Products Marketing: "I started paying attention to smart marketing around the time I began browbeating my mom for an American Girl (MAT) doll. Now that I'm out of school, I'm eager to learn consumer products marketing from the ground up. Fresh off an internship at an organic chocolates company and with a huge appetite for on-the-fly learning, I'm excited to join a product marketing team and help expand audience, buzz, and revenues."
Professional Services Marketing: "The last project in my marketing program at the University of North Carolina was a group consulting project for a local accounting firm, where we overhauled the firm's marketing plan to shift into a new, lucrative practice area. I'm chomping at the bit to help a service business rev up its revenues as an in-house marketing pro. I'm comfortable with everything the social media world has come up with so far, and enough of a left-brain/right-brain mix to enjoy and thrive on the quantitative and analytical parts of marketing, as well as the creative bits."

Health-Care Marketing: "What's fascinating for me about health-care marketing is the combination of quantitative analysis and simple, old-fashioned listening it entails. I'm a new grad from the University of North Carolina with a passion for accessible health care and for better communication about how patients can use the resources around them. I'm excited to join a health-care marketing team and learn its craft while helping patients learn about wellness and nutrition for themselves and their families."

4. Use a Human Voice Corporate-speak boilerplate is out. A conversational tone in a resumé (and a cover letter and LinkedIn profile) is essential to grab a hiring manager's attention. The old "results-oriented professional with a bottom-line orientation"-type branding won't make a hiring manager's heart beat faster. It's okay to use "I" in a resumé—after all, the document is about you—and to use normal, conversational English instead of stuffy corporate language. A conversational resumé, LinkedIn profile, and cover letters will put you out in front of the hordes of job seekers hitting the market this spring.

5. Get LinkedIn If you're not already on the mega-popular social networking site LinkedIn, what are you waiting for? Granted, it's not as colorful and gossipy as Facebook, but it's far more effective for businesspeople and job-seekers of all stripes. A basic account is free and a great, professional photo (head and shoulders—no bikinis, bongs, or beer steins please) is a must for your LinkedIn profile. Get connected to your schoolmates, your parents' friends and the friends of your parents, along with high school buddies and anyone else you know who's already using LinkedIn or could be induced to join. You'll use the site (with some 100 million members in the business-focused social networking space) for research, to reach out to hiring managers and others, and to increase your knowledge of industries through LinkedIn's Groups and Answers functions.

6. Assemble Your Network As a new grad, consider everyone you've met in your life a possible conduit to your next job. Make a list of 100 people (you read that right—it may take an hour, but it's worth it) who should know about your job search, including the lady you used to babysit for and the folks whose lawns you mowed back in high school. Don't leave anyone out: Scoutmasters and high school musical directors, every boss you've ever had, and former co-workers all count as networking contacts with value. If they're not on LinkedIn and you don't have their e-mail addresses, find them on www.whitepages.com and send a snail mail letter.
People who knew you as a toddler are undoubtedly game to help you launch your career. Don't be shy. There is no statute of limitations on human relationships.

7. Research Employers Which employers are hiring in your area or the city you plan to move to? Use Indeed, a massive jobs aggregator, to find out. Plug in keywords (the site has only two fields, one labeled "What" and the other "Where") to spot job opportunities in the geographical areas you're focusing on. If you find interesting employers that don't now have perfect-fit jobs available for you, go back to LinkedIn and sign up to follow these employers so you'll get a heads-up when they have news or leadership appointments. Indeed.com also lets you create alerts that will ping you when new jobs crop up. Jump on those. If you can compile a list of 20 or 30 likely employers to follow, you'll be way ahead of the new-grad job-search pack.

8. Know Your Market Value What are new graduates getting paid in the geographic areas you're targeting, as well as in your functional area? You've got to have this information before you hit the talent marketplace. Use Payscale.com and Glassdoor.com to learn who's getting paid what and where. You may have a range of salary targets if your job-direction prongs vary—for instance, social work jobs pay less than finance jobs)—but in every case, you've got to know the prevailing salary levels before you get hit with the question: "What do you expect to earn?"

9. Practice-Interview, a Lot On-campus career placement offices love to mock-interview students and new grads. If the service is available at your school, go for it. There's nothing like interview practice to iron out rough spots in your stories and help you overcome perfectly normal job-search jitters. Get used to answering such standard interview questions as "why are you interested in our company?" and "what are your goals for your career?" When your parents and friends make introductions to working people who are willing to have coffee with you, grab those opportunities, too. The more mentoring, advice, and mock-interviewing time you can snag, the better.

10. Get Your Spiel Down Imagine that you're a middle manager who needs help in your department this summer. You meet a couple of new grads at a neighborhood event. You ask each one: "What are your plans, now that you're out of school?" One new grad says, "get a job, I guess." The other one says, "I plan to go to law school down the road, but right now I need some practical experience to understand how the business world works. I'm especially interested in how companies negotiate contracts." Which new grad is going to get a second look? The one who has a sense of direction, no doubt. Whether or not your department's extra-help need involves contracts, you're likely to bring the second new grad in for an interview. So get your spiel down, now—the answer to the question, "so what's next for you?" Your clarity and conviction are more impressive to a hiring manager than specific experience in his or her functional area. After all, you're a new grad. No one expects you to have years of experience.
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