

The Do's and Don'ts of References

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Ever wonder about how to properly utilize reference sources? Here are some thoughts offered by executive search industry experts...

Ask Permission

When pulling together your references, whether for customer or job development, always ask potential reference sources for permission prior to being used as a reference. You don't want a potential employer or search consultant to catch them by surprise! Never assume they'll be your reference and always brief them on the role or customer relationship for which you vying. Let them know they can best help you by being honest and forthcoming. Ask your reference in advance what s/ he feels are your strengths and weaknesses vis-à-vis the role for which you are applying. This way you will know what to expect from this reference source, and thus how to best use this person as a reference.

Customers as References

Proceed with caution if you plan to ask one of your customers for a job reference. Remember first and foremost that you have a fiduciary relationship with your employer and it is your responsibility to protect your trusted client-customer relationships. If you feel a customer will provide you with a stellar reference, then make sure you always reflect positively on your current employer. Outline your goals, perhaps explain how those goals can't be achieved with your current employer, and indicate how your customer reference might help you to achieve your professional objectives in another organization. Reinforce and protect the relationship between the customer and your employer at all times.

If asking for a potential new client recommendation, then give your reference source some background on the potential new client. Ask them how you best helped them, and strategize for just a moment on how you can help this new client too.

Privacy is Best

Keep your references private. Listing them publicly (such as on a website) is not fair to your reference and "cheapens" it. Do not publicly advertise their contact information! When soliciting references, let them know of your aspirations and ask them for additional leads and ideas. Keep the relationship balanced; ask them how you can help them as well.

Add a line to the bottom of your resume which states, "References will be made available upon request." This way you don't burn-out your references too early in the process and protect them from unwanted solicitation.

Who Should Serve

When applying for a job, standard practice is to line up a 360 degree roster comprised of your most recent 2-3 bosses, 1-2 peers and 1-2 subordinates. Ask your potential employer what they need for references; they will tell you.

When the time comes, you will want to be very specific, such as: "I reported to John Brown when he was CEO of Company ABC and I served in the role of Chief Marketing Officer in the same company." Also include the reference's current title & company, office/mobile phone, email address, and any information on availability, i.e., in the country this week, then leaving for a 3-week trip to China on Sunday. Time and detail are of the essence.

Just as you let them know when a prospective employer (or customer, for that matter), may call them, you also want them to contact you when they have served as a reference for you. Ask your reference sources to call you immediately after speaking with someone calling for a reference on you. Think of it as staying abreast of your credit report...only calling them will help, not hurt, your score!