



ATTORNEY SEARCH

The Pros and Cons of Thank You Letters

This feature pits our founder and CEO, A. Harrison Barnes, against Carey Bertolet, our senior recruiter in the world's largest legal market, New York City. Read their insightful opinions about Thank You Letters, and decide for yourself. And let us know who you think won this debate!

The Pros of the Thank You Letter

By [Carey Bertolet](#)

When discussing the efficacy of a thank you letter, the debate always seems to center on the issue of whether thank you letters will actually give you an advantage or make a difference in the recruiting process. **I believe that thank you letters are absolutely necessary,** whether or not they provide you any advantage. A thank you letter, in its purest form, is simply that, a thank you. You thank someone for giving you a birthday gift or for doing you a favor. These gestures are done (hopefully) in their purest forms, recognizing someone's efforts on your behalf.

In that sense, I believe a thank you letter is vital, simply because it is classy to acknowledge the time someone took from his/her busy schedule to serve you. Sure, it may not have required the effort put forth by Aunt Sally in buying you that fondue set, but it still deserves a thank you. And, in the spirit of civility and etiquette, thank you letters are always appropriate. Even in the worst-case scenario -- an interview that doesn't result in a call-back or an offer -- it is still an introduction to other members of your legal community. That legal community, depending on your practice area and your location, can be very small. Why not leave the members of that community with a positive feeling?

Thank You Letters Do Help

Etiquette aside, there are those who will only send thank you letters if they perceive it will have some

The Cons of a Thank You Letter

By [A. Harrison Barnes](#)

One of the most common questions that attorneys ask me after going in for interviews is whether or not they should send a thank you letter. The resounding answer is no. Before you ever send a thank you letter, please read this article.

The longer I have been in the business of legal recruiting, the more I have become convinced that sending a thank you letter is a bad idea. I have heard--and seen--far too many horror stories regarding thank you letters, and **I believe the evidence strongly weighs against the writing of thank you letters.** They are simply not a good idea.

There is one thing you should always ask yourself when considering whether or not to send a thank you letter: what would you think if you got one of these after a first date? In the job-search situation, you are trying out for a potential long-term relationship with your employer. Just as there is in dating, you need to have at least some mystery to make the other side like you, and, in addition, the other side wants to feel like they are lucky if you are interested in them too.

This article analyzes the benefits and the costs of writing thank you letters. I hope that after reading it, you too will conclude, as I have, that sending a thank you letter is not a good idea.

advantage. Although I don't believe a thank you letter is likely to change an interviewer's mind about your candidacy, I do believe that it can benefit you in the interview process. Here are two examples:

1. Most firms ask that an interviewing attorney fill out a formal evaluation form for a candidate, which eventually reaches the decision-making attorney(s). After you've interviewed with an attorney, he/she may fill out the evaluation form immediately. It may, however, get buried under more pressing client work. When I interviewed laterals, even when I liked them and felt strongly about their candidacy, sometimes those evaluation forms languished on my desk. When two or three days later, I received a thank you letter from one of the candidates I liked, it was a great reminder to make sure that I circulated my comments for review. In that way, thank you letters will help make the process quicker and more favorable for the candidate.

2. Some firms or individual attorneys may not make decisions about lateral attorneys immediately. That may happen on a weekly or semi-weekly basis. One attorney here, while practicing, filled out evaluations once a week. She was more favorable and more likely to remember specifics with respect to those lawyers who sent her thank you letters. This may not hold true for every lawyer at every law firm. But if you interviewed with one person who will remember your visit more vividly because of a thank you letter, isn't it worth the time? Likewise, recruiting committees typically meet once every week or two. If your advocate in that committee will push your candidacy more passionately because he/she is still basking in the glow of a genuine thank you letter, shouldn't that be your practice?

A Thank you letter Can Never Hurt

It seems difficult to imagine that you would receive negative feedback for the simple act of sending a thank you letter. If you cannot under any circumstances write legibly, the handwritten thank you letter may not be the proper medium. If you do endeavor to send thank you letters, they must not contain any misspellings or other mistakes of any kind. They should be brief, sincere, and personalized.

I happen to disagree with those who believe a thank you letter makes a job candidate appear desperate or as though they have nothing better to do. The tone of your interview should be carried over to your thank you letter. In my experience, a firm is more likely to discontinue conversations with a candidate who seems

A. The Rationale for a Thank you letter

Many attorneys think that sending a thank you letter is a good idea. The common reasons they think this are (1) it demonstrates you are interested in the job, (2) it shows you are appreciative and classy, (3) it helps you stand out from the crowd and be more likely to get hired, and (4) it restates your case.

1. Thank you letters Demonstrate You Are Interested in the Job

If you go to an interview, you are interested in the job. Moreover, if you apply to the firm in the first place, you are interested in the job. Think about it. The employer is already aware of your interest. If you really want the job, then let the employer know the reasons why during the interview. This is all you need to do.

Would you send a thank you letter after a good first or second date? If you got a thank you letter in the mail after a good first date, what would you think? You would probably think a couple of things.

First, you would think that you had already "closed the deal" and that the person was very interested in you. While this might seem like a good idea in some respects, it isn't. I am not suggesting you play mind games in either your personal or professional life, but I am suggesting that you do not need to completely "show your cards" to your potential employer.

If you show your cards too early, the potential employer will think that you may not have a lot of options. The employer wants to feel as if you are someone that is in demand in the market and will view you more favorably. To revisit the dating metaphor: people, in general, would not be excited to learn that no one else would even consider asking out their boyfriend or girlfriend if he or she were single.

2. Thank you letters Show You Are Appreciative and Classy

Many attorneys got it drilled into them at some point in their lives (by their grandmothers, perhaps) that a classy person always writes a thank you letter to show his/her appreciation. I do not necessarily agree with this.

In romance novels, notes are always being exchanged between the knight and his damsel. In addition, many Americans have misguided views about how those higher on the socioeconomic ladder behave. In this rarified environment (where a powerful partner you interviewed with might certainly exist), it is imagined that thank-you notes on expensive stationery are routinely exchanged after meetings.

That is not necessarily the case. In fact, if a client got one of these notes, he/she would be more likely to think the

disinterested than with someone who appears to really want the job.

You Can Occasionally E-mail a Thank you letter

Today, email correspondence is increasingly appropriate, and I've seen many occasions where a candidate chooses to email his/her thank you letter. I personally believe that this should be done only in rare circumstances. An attorney may ask you to follow up with him or her by email, for example, to send a writing sample. In that circumstance, where the attorney has set the parameters for the correspondence, email is acceptable.

My concern about email thank you letters is two-fold. One, some attorneys view email thank you letters as requiring very little effort and would prefer the written variety. Although people with these preferences may increasingly be in the minority, it's impossible to know your audience. That's why a written letter is best. Two, e-mail tends to appear sloppier than a well-thought-out letter. There is something inherently casual about typing an email than writing a letter, and the opportunity for mistakes is increased. In no event should an email thank you letter be sent to a group of recipients. Thank-you emails should not be sent from a work account or a silly email address. If necessary, open a devoted email account that contains just your last name or some variation thereof.

In the interest of community and civility, I highly recommend that thank you letters remain a constant in the way candidates and interviewers interact.

attorney had ulterior motives and not that he/she was classy or appreciative.

The fact of the matter is you can express your appreciation at the end of the interviews by simply saying thank you, smiling, and genuinely conveying your feelings through the use of appropriate body language. Regarding the class factor: you are who you are. You will come across as the person you are by the way you talk, the way you dress, the way you carry yourself, etc. You are not going to change the employer's mind about your classiness through a thank-you note.

3. Thank you letters Help You Stand Out from the Crowd

Many attorneys think that sending a thank-you note will increase the odds of getting hired. In most firms, especially large law firms, this is rarely going to make much of a difference.

Let me tell you how most interviews with large law firms work. I hate to be so simplistic, but in many respects this is the case:

- a. Partner gets your resume (and cover letter) from the recruiting coordinator of the firm via office messenger or email;
- b. Partner reviews your resume and decides whether or not you look good within five seconds;
- c. You show up for the interview. Partner makes up mind about whether or not he/she likes you by the way you look and what was in your resume within five seconds;
- d. Partner interviews you for 15-60 minutes. He/she may actually change his/her mind about whether he/she likes you during the interview (10-15% of the time);
- e. Partner fills out an evaluation of you in less than minutes and sends it back to recruiting coordinator;
- f. Recruiting coordinator goes over your reviews from partner(s) and/or associates who interviewed you and advises the hiring partner of them. Person is ultimately hired or not hired after some further discussion. This could take a day, or it could take months. Firm will be concerned with whether they have the money to hire you, the work to hire you, whether your experience is right for the job, whether your interviewers liked you, whether you are likely to succeed in this position, your potential employment stability, your "fit" with the firm, and more.

While I have gone on about making this point in an extremely long winded way, I hope you can see that there is little a thank-you note can do to improve your chances in the above process. Yes, the interviewing process is different for different firms and for different classes of attorneys (partners, associates, etc.). Nevertheless, the basic interview follows this sort of format. Here, the thank you letter is not all that likely to make that much of an impact on the process.

4. Thank you letters Restate Your Case

I believe it is important to devote a separate section to “restating your case.” Many attorneys who interview with law firms are under the impression that they need to (1) tell them what they are going to tell them in a cover letter, (2) tell them in an interview and (3) then tell them again in a subsequent thank you letter. If you have any familiarity with marketing, then you certainly may subscribe to this belief system as well.

I do not think you ever need to restate your case after the interview. If you have made your initial case well enough, you will not need to because you will already be believed by whoever is weighing the pros and cons of hiring you. If you restate your case, you may actually make things worse if there is any doubt or indecision with your reasons for wanting to work for the firm.

One of the most interesting classes I ever took in law school was a class in conjunction with the psychiatry department in which we studied murderers. This class was fascinating because five other students and I actually got to watch police and psychiatrists interview murderers behind two-way mirrors. One of the things that I learned in this class was that no matter how bad something is that someone does, he/she almost never thinks that he/she is wrong or change position. Throughout my legal career, as I worked for a judge, and then a string of attorneys, it became very clear to me that once someone has formed an opinion about something, it is exceedingly rare that his/her opinion will be changed. Certainly, outstanding lawyers can influence judges and juries. The truth remains, though, that most people believe what they believe, and there is little you can do to change that. There are thousands of political, psychological, and social situations where it is next to impossible to change what one party thinks.

In the interview situation, a thank you letter is rarely going to change how someone thinks about you. In fact, because people are more eager to justify their own decisions than anything, a thank you letter may actually serve the opposite purpose because the interviewer will read into it what he/she wants to in order to justify his/her decision.

If you did something wrong in an interview or if you did not make your case well enough, the odds are very slim that a thank you letter is going to make much of a difference. More than likely, it will hurt you.

B. Why You Should Not Write Thank you letters

You should not write thank you letters because (1) they make you appear not to have any other options, (2) they give you an opportunity to screw up, (3) they can poten-

tially turn interviewers against you, (4) they can make you appear dishonest or disingenuous, and (5) they make you appear like you have nothing better to do.

1. Thank you letters Make You Appear Not to Have Any Other Options

Let me be frank about one thing: most attorneys do not write thank you letters after an interview. In fact, I would say that less than 5% do. Accordingly, the people who will receive your thank you letter likely never wrote one themselves when they got a job at the firm. Therefore, their first questions are as follows: why is this person writing me a thank you letter? Is his current job in jeopardy? Is he desperate for a job?

As a legal recruiter, I have worked with numerous attorneys throughout the years. I have worked with attorneys whose firms were shutting down, attorneys who are unemployed, and attorneys who were eager to find new positions for various reasons. The attorneys who typically ask me whether or not they should write a thank you letter are usually in trouble or desperate for a change like those above. I hate to be so brutally honest, but this is true.

If an attorney is considering writing a thank you letter, he/she has put himself/herself in a situation where he/she is effectively saying, "I really need this job, I want to give myself every possible advantage, and a good thank you letter may really push me over the top." This is not the best strategy.

If you appear not to have any other options, the firm is likely to think there is something wrong with you that they do not know about. Firms want to feel like all of their attorneys are strong and in demand. If you do not appear in demand, firms will think that you are interviewing there because they are losers. Firms do not want to feel like losers.

There is also no way to make firms think you are in demand in a letter that is likely to be effective. Lawyers are suspicious by nature and are likely to think you are "bluffing" anyway if you try and make this case in a letter. It is also likely to piss them off. Keep the mystery going by not writing a thank you letter.

2. Thank you letters Give You the Opportunity to Screw Up

I have heard so many thank-you-letter horror stories that it is difficult to keep track. When you write a thank you letter, the chances are very good you will make an error. They happen all the time. One of the most common errors is a typo, a misspelling, or something of the sort. You may get the firm's suite number wrong, you may misspell a name -- the list is endless. One of the more common

ones I have seen, is attorneys interviewing with several firms and sending thank you letters and mixing up the people at different firms. This is more common than you might think. All of these errors are common. I would estimate they occur in more than 50% of the thank you letters attorneys write after an interview.

Regardless of your good intentions, these errors can be fatal. They communicate a lack of detail in an extremely important piece of written work product designed to get you a job. They give those who interviewed you and were unsure or simply did not like you excellent ammunition to use against you to prevent you from getting a job. No matter how hard you try, you may end up making errors in these letters. I do not care if you were Summa Cum Laude from a top-five law school and work at a top-10 American law firm: to err is human.

Have you ever looked at someone's handwriting and decided that you did not like him/her because it was too sloppy, not sloppy enough, too organized, too pronounced, too formal -- whatever? The fact is many people will see others' writing and reach conclusions simply by the way it looks. I'm not kidding! Why on earth would you want to give someone an opportunity to dislike you based on this?

In addition, we have not even spoken about the quality of the stationery you are using. Is it too expensive, not expensive enough, too colorful, too bland, too large, too small, too formal, too personalized, not personalized enough -- whatever? Again, the quality of the stationery you are using says a lot about you. Maybe the person receiving it will like you based on this, maybe they will not. You simply have no way of knowing. Why, though, should you even take a chance?

I have also seen many stellar attorneys who were guilty of (1) faxing thank you letters from work or (2) sending a thank you letter from their work email address. These are stylistic things that can also cost you an offer, regardless of how good of an interviewee you are. It is not worth the risk.

All of the concerns above are stylistic. Certainly, you can screw yourself up based on style, but what about substance?

In your thank you letter, you may say something like the following:

As a patent attorney, I really feel Smith Smith & Smith fits in with my goals. I particularly look forward to the opportunity to start getting some litigation experience, in addition to doing patent prosecution at your firm. What if the firm does not have much IP litigation and only

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prosecution? You may have just blown yourself out of the water. Despite their representations in the interview, you have no idea what the firm's plans are for you. You could say 10,000 different things like this in a thank you letter and end up not getting a job due to it, unbeknownst to you.

The point of this is that you never know how the firm is going to view either the stylistic or the substantive representations you make in your thank you letter. Be extremely careful before you write a thank you letter and know that it will have consequences you might not ever be able to foresee.

3. Thank you letters Can Potentially Turn Interviewers Against You

The fact of the matter is some interviewers are going to be more interesting to you than others. Consequently, you will make more of a connection with certain interviewers. While this is perfectly normal, the fact that you might have more of a connection with one person than another is not something that is going to serve you all that well in the interview stage.

When you write your interviewers thank you letters, there is a chance that some may compare letters. If one letter is long and shows an obvious connection and another does not, one interviewer may decide they do not like you due to this. Does this sound crazy? Yes. The dynamics of social organizations are nothing short of insane. You simply cannot understand them, especially when you are not working there.

Do not make the dynamics of a certain firm work against you. This is almost unavoidable if you are sending several thank you letters. Many interviewees decide based on this logic just to write one thank you letter, to the highest ranking partner they interviewed with, for example.

Again, this can backfire. "He only respects the most powerful person he interviewed with," one interviewer might think. That person would not even be giving him assignments, I would.

I hope you can understand that there is just potentially too much going on here with thank you letters for you to get involved. They can turn your interviewers against you. Avoid them.

4. Thank you letters Can Make You Appear Dishonest or Disingenuous

Thank you letters are typically rife with statements that sound suspect. Interviewees will say things like "it was the most interesting conversation I have had in a long while," or "our discussion reaffirmed my belief that this is where I really want to work." When an interviewer gets

a letter like this, he is often surprised because you may have only touched briefly upon what you are referring to. Accordingly, what you write will sound dishonest. The main issue with thank you letters is that it is often difficult to say anything without appearing to be stretching the truth. The intent of most attorneys in writing them is to say something -- anything -- in order to make a positive impression and stand out. This is often impossible to do without appearing to be pushing it a little bit.

If you appear to be a little bit overreaching in your thank you letter, the interviewer may think that you may not be trustworthy. You may remind them of opposing counsel, an ex-wife, or worse. You need to be extremely careful.

Given this concern, many attorneys try to be understated in their thank you letters. The problem with this is that they then sound disinterested in the position or even sarcastic. You can never control how others view what you write.

5. Thank you letters Make You Appear Like You Have Nothing Better to Do

Good attorneys are always busy. Clients and other attorneys in the firm always want to give them work because they know the work done by the good attorney is of the highest quality. Those are also the sorts of attorneys most firms want to hire.

When you sit down to pen a thank-you note, many attorneys who will receive it cannot help but think that you have nothing better to do. This is extremely unattractive to many interviewers. Worse, you may fax them the thank you letter from work on the firm stationery or send it using the firm postage meter. This looks bad, really bad.

You want your interviewers to think you have a lot going on, so much so that you do not have time to write a thank you letter. You do not need to make all interviewers think this, but you need to make some of them think it.

C. Conclusions

Getting a job, interviewing for a job, and then getting an offer all comprise an intricate dance. This is especially so with law firms. If you screw up at any stage in the process, you may lose your opportunity for an offer.

If Not a Thank you letter, Then What?

All you have to do is shine in your interviews and make the best impression possible. Do this and nothing more, and you will never have the need for a thank you letter.