

# HOW TO WRITE A REALLY TOUCHING YEAR-END LETTER

It's an annual ritual—but especially in tough times, it's a great opportunity. Here's how to get the most out of the holiday message to employees.

**Yes,** it's that most wonderful time of the year—when executives' thoughts turn to writing the annual year-end letter to employees. From someone who has helped many executives write their letters, here are some tips for making yours sparkle.

**Give a gift:** Plan the content and tone of your letter as if it were a gift that you are giving each employee personally because, in a sense, it is. A well-planned message at this time of year has the power to delight and inspire. Determine the response you would like to evoke from the people who open your letter and read your words. Will employees glow at your praise? Will they smile in agreement when you acknowledge the obstacles you have overcome together? Or—will they roll their eyes in response to your narrow focus on numbers? Give the gift of yourself in your letter. Communicate your gratitude for people's talent and commitment and your joy in leading a terrific team.

**Keep it short and sweet:** The adage is accurate—good things do come in small packages. Whether it's exquisite jewelry, the key to an automobile or an executive letter, small is beautiful. Keep your annual letter brief. An ideal length is three to five paragraphs that capture the essence of your message and express your appreciation for employees. Resist the urge to provide a comprehensive summary of the activity and achievements of the year that is nearly past. While there certainly is value in a look back, don't include the details in the body of your letter. Post "the year in review" on the company intranet and link to it in your letter or simply refer readers to the webpage for more information.

**Bring the bling:** This is the time to use language that sparkles.

**Be thoughtful:** Consider what your employees hope to hear from you. A rehash of "challenges and opportunities" will ring hollow. Highlight specific, organization-wide wins as a chance to praise all employees for their contributions. Be realistic and truthful about problems, but don't dwell on them, and season your words with confidence and concern for people. At the end of 2008, it will be tempting to opine about the state of the global economy and the outcome of the U.S. presidential election, and their impact on your industry and your company. Instead, focus on your vision for the future and employees' role in making it a reality. Express your belief in their ability to tackle the work ahead—and say why that work is meaningful—not only for the firm, but also for consumers, patients, families—whoever your key stakeholders happen to be. Cite some specific examples of the company's plans for the year ahead and invite employees to be part of the anticipated action. Be enthusiastic and inclusive.

At all costs, avoid the prescriptive "Have fun!" or even worse "Use the holidays to rest and refresh because you'll need every ounce of energy for the grueling year ahead," or words to that effect. Your message is the green light for people to relax (within reason) and socialize.

**Wrap it up with a bow:** Present your letter in an attractive format. Give your readers the pleasure of discovering your messages as if they were unwrapping a beautifully decorated gift. Think of your first paragraph as the bow—the attention-grabber. Thank employees for their

hard work and their commitment. Use the word "you" right away and speak directly to your readers. Tie a ribbon around your messages by acknowledging the importance and dignity of all people who interact with the organization. Mention your robust corporate social responsibility programs, green initiatives and pro bono work. Finish your letter with a flourish of goodwill. This is the one time of year that people of all faiths and backgrounds embrace a common sense of festivity. Let your humanity shine. Offer heartfelt holiday greetings of a general nature without attempting to recognize each diverse tradition. Close with a simple and sincere wish for a happy and healthy New Year.

**Send it special delivery:** The most effective delivery method is the one that reaches most employees at the same time before they disperse to celebrate the holidays. You can print and mail your letter to employees' homes; send an e-mail message if most employees have computer access; post it to the company intranet; or include it in your blog. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, your letter need not be a letter at all. Podcasting or videotaping your message may increase its visibility and impact. Make it special by sending it in a way that respects recipients.

A thoughtful gift is a pleasure for both the giver and the receiver. Make your year-end letter a gift, conveying a powerful message of confidence, trust and appreciation to your employees this holiday season.

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