



CareerBuilder – 5 Tips for Maximizing Your Admission Recommendations

By Walter Hutchinson, business school admissions and career strategist

(originally appeared on DegreeDriven.com)

Getting into a top business school is an arduous process, with potential for pitfalls around every corner. All too often, applicants get so involved with the essay and interview portion of the process, that they underestimate the importance of the recommendation. Applicants need to manage the recommendations component of the business school admissions process as strategically as they do all the other parts.

Deciding on an appropriate strategy can quickly become complicated, particularly if an applicant has clear areas in need of improvement that must be addressed. Initially, the key consideration is identifying how to present such weaknesses in a recommendation that will positively impact the application, then approaching the referee best able to deliver that message credibly and effectively.

Applicants should consider the following five strategies to ensure that their recommendations help lead to admissions success:

1. Assume your referee does NOT have experience writing business school recommendations. Most don't, so send the recommendation form with basic guidelines that detail what kinds of topics should be covered in answer responses. By sending guidelines, the referee will understand how to provide information, which helps the admissions committee to corroborate claims made in other parts of an application, as well as learn how the applicant is viewed from a third party perspective.
2. Target referees with executive or senior titles where you can, but only the ones who know you well and with whom you have worked. The admission committee will be impressed by the insightful comments your referee provides, particularly if observations of your performance come from people with senior-level organizational responsibility. The positive evaluation will put forth the notion of the applicant as a future business leader and as a candidate worthy of joining the business school. For those applicants who are entrepreneurs or non-profit

leaders, approach clients who have observed you in a supervisory capacity and are in the position to evaluate your performance on multiple levels.

3. Preemptively balance your admissions portfolio. If you have a weak class rank or GPA, have the referee focus on your achievements in a group-oriented learning situation. Low GMAT scores should be balanced with past or recent quantitatively-demanding projects. Applicants with short performance records should have referees discuss their qualitative, analytical contributions.
4. Bring performance characteristics to life. Have referees highlight analytical and leadership abilities as well as career potential through examples — the more vivid, the better.
5. Respond to weaknesses or areas for improvement with candor. Portrayals of total perfection or flawlessness actually weaken a recommendation. Referees should be guided to resist the instinct to avoid the subject or to superficially respond. Performance reviews are a great place to start, if available, but regardless of the source material, the comments should provide insight into how the applicant responds to constructive criticism or takes initiative to address a shortcoming.

Always bear in mind your desired effect depends on message strategy and substance. The more insightful your referee's comments are, the more seriously and favorably the admissions committee will weigh your application.

Walter Hutchinson is a 20 year global business school admissions and career strategist who has helped hundreds of people in the Americas, Europe and Asia gain admission to the world's most prestigious business schools.

