Seven Ways to Increase the Chances that Your Grant Proposal will be Funded

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Grants are not a game of chance — but you can improve the odds of being funded if you play by these seven rules!

1. Ask for money for what your organization already does well – and make sure that your project is “grant-ready.”
2. Have a conversation with the funder prior to developing your proposal.
3. Speed up your writing process by creating a proposal outline.
4. Make the proposal meticulously neat, easy to skim and light on the jargon and acronyms.
5. Scrutinize the budget to make sure that the math adds up, the expenses are reasonable, and your nonprofit quantifies cash or in-kind match.
6. Document that your nonprofit’s board provides strong support — including, ideally, 100% board giving.
7. Follow up assiduously after you submit the proposal, including providing prompt responses to any questions from the funder and seeking to revise and resubmit proposals that are turned down.

1. Ask for money for what your organization already does well – and make sure that your project is "grant-ready."

Funders want to invest in strategies that they believe work well and will have an impact.

It's easy to make modifications and updates to well-functioning programs, and to attract new grant support to projects with track records of success.

Funders also like transformation and innovative thinking, though – so a new project can be highly fundable if it has been planned logically in response to real need.

With this in mind, **be leery of developing proposals with nonprofit program directors who haven't yet gotten their project to "gel"** (a concept you'll be familiar with if you like to make jam).

In this scenario, the program director knows that he or she wants funding, but hasn't figured out the details of the program (how much it will cost, how it will be staffed, etc.). Along with not being clear on the details, the program person isn't able to articulate need, goals and objectives that will make sense to an external audience.

Make sure that your project is "grant ready" by assessing the following qualities:

- ✓ If the project is ongoing, does it have a track record of success? Is data available to show that the project has impact on the people or issue it set out to influence?

- ✓ If the project is new, has its development been informed by credible research in about effective strategies and best practices within the specific field? To attract financial support, you will need to demonstrate that the project approach is "evidence-based" – as opposed to whims and hunches!

- ✓ Is there compelling need for the project – and does this need relate directly to the beneficiaries of the project? (Funders don't really want to support organizations' needs – they want to support organizations' impact.)

- ✓ Can the nonprofit organization demonstrate that it is committed to the project and can provide the range of support that the project will need in order to succeed? Grants never cover the entire cost of a project, and funders want to know that the organization is fully behind the effort.

If you conclude that the project may not be ready for prime time, you may need to work with your organization's leadership to rethink the project design.

2. Have a conversation with the funder prior to developing your proposal.

It can be tempting to jump into the deep end of proposal-writing without talking to the funder first. But even if you are confident that you understand the guidelines and that your project is likely to be a good fit, it always helps to have a thoughtful and thorough conversation with the funder before doing the time-consuming work of proposal writing.

Except in the rare cases when a funder's guidelines explicitly discourage grantseekers from contacting them, most private foundations and grant-making public agencies are open to hearing from potential applicants. Some even hold public information sessions to explain their RFPs or new initiatives.

In general, you can expect funders to have a system in place to answer potential grantees' questions, especially if they have professional staff. And when you involve a funder's program officer or donor early in the process of constructing the proposal, you're increasing the odds that it will be eventually funded.

It is possible that your initial outreach will result in the funder discouraging you from submitting a proposal, because the project is not a fit or the funder is not currently accepting new applications (or for some other reason). But even if this disappointing outcome occurs, you've just freed up time that you can devote to pursuing other funding sources instead.

More often, the program officer or donor will listen to you describe your concept, then make some suggestions about highlighting a certain aspect of the project, or even not mentioning a specific aspect of the project, that could help put your proposal closer to the top of the pile.

To ensure that you cover all the bases and bring good information back to your colleagues, take the following steps prior to contacting the funder:

- ✓ Read the grant guidelines carefully and highlight anything that is unclear.
- ✓ Research the funder's prior giving history to determine patterns in grantmaking and how your organization might complement their docket.
- ✓ Confer with your program staff to determine which projects that meet the guidelines are of highest priority to pitch.
- ✓ Write a set of talking points/questions, to be followed as you talk to the funder.

3. Speed up your writing process by creating a proposal outline.

Your proposal definitely won't be funded if you don't finish it by the deadline. But writing proposal narratives can be daunting, especially under pressure of busy schedules and nonprofit funding needs.

Two issues that will slow you down are **procrastination** (you haven't started the narrative because you're overwhelmed with how difficult it will be to write), or **overwriting** (you're wordsmithing individual paragraphs in some sections of the proposal, while you still have no idea what you're going to write in other sections). Procrastination causes unnecessary stress, and overwriting puts you into the weeds of writing perfect prose before you've collected all of the key information that you need.

The good news is that an outline can help you to manage these types of issues, and keep you on track towards completing the proposal with time to spare.

To break through proposal-writing inertia, follow these four tips:

- ✓ Start by copying the proposal narrative guidelines. Include in your outline the proposal headings and subheadings and any specific directions provided for each section. If the funder's guidelines don't specify what the proposal should cover, copy a "common grant application" format such as the excellent one provided by the Association of Baltimore Area Grantmakers at http://www.abagrantmakers.org/?page=CommonGrantApp.

- ✓ Keep it simple. Sentence fragments and imperfect word choices are fine. The outline should be a scaffold – not a completely constructed building.

- ✓ If your outline is a Microsoft Word document, use the review tab to add comments. The comments function allows you to include all of the technical or detailed text that you may want to draw from as you write the proposal, without cluttering up the main text of the document.

- ✓ Ask program staff to forward you all existing electronic documents about the project – such as white papers, emails, reports and articles. Cut and paste relevant information from these documents and drop the text directly into the outline (or the comments section as described above).

Treat the outline as a tool to capture the information you already have and identify the information you still need. I find that when I have a basic outline in place, the proposal practically writes itself. (I just have to show up at the keyboard.)

4. Make the proposal meticulously neat, easy to skim and light on the jargon and acronyms.

Neatness matters. **Crisply formatted proposals with lots of white space send a positive message about your organization.** You'll come across as modern and confident – an organization that funders want to partner with.

You also need to keep the "skimmability" of your proposal in mind. Joseph Barbato, author of *How to Write Knockout Proposals: What You Must Know (And Say) to Win Funding Every Time*, writes that we should assume that at least one board member of every foundation will only skim your proposal (not read it). **Make the skimming a worthwhile experience** for this board member by writing substantive and engaging proposal titles, headings and subheadings, and other text that will jump out at a glance.

I recently saw a community-based youth program proposal that followed this principle well. They added two simple text boxes to the three-page proposal narrative, one with a quote from a teacher about how the program had improved a student's life, and another with strong statistics about program effectiveness. Reviewers may not remember the details of the program design, but they will remember that there was a story about one student's success, and that there were numbers proving that multiple students benefit.

Finally, **reduce your use of jargon and acronyms** within grant proposals. The buzzwords that you use with colleagues and partner organizations can make your day-to-day work easier, but will confuse and annoy non-specialists.

Keep these tips in mind:

- ✓ Pay attention to details such as the resolution of your nonprofit's logo (no blurry logos, please!) and the position of page breaks (avoid splitting charts over two pages, for example).

- ✓ Add formatting flourishes such as headings and subheadings that are in a distinctive font; page numbers; charts with relevant and easy-to-understand data; and pulled quotes from program beneficiaries.

- ✓ Create an appendix to include with the proposal. The appendix allows you to add information to a proposal without clogging the narrative with lots of text.

- ✓ Explain a technical or industry-specific term the first time it is used. Similarly, don't assume funders know what acronyms stand for. If you feel it is necessary to use acronyms, be sure to spell them out completely the first time you use them.

5. Scrutinize the budget to make sure that the math adds up, the expenses are reasonable, and your nonprofit quantifies cash or in-kind match.

Funders receive more grant proposals than they can support. For this reason, they are always looking for a reason to weed your proposal out – to put it in the "no funding" pile. **Budgets are often the object of special scrutiny, and budget issues can sink your chances of funding.**

Some board members or program officers flip to the proposal's budget prior to reading any other part of the application. **Numbers tell the project's story** more succinctly than prose. Board members or donors with a business background are especially sensitive to budgets and perhaps less forgiving of errors.

If you are creating a multi-year budget, consider Mark Whitacre's advice shared at http://www.goldstonegrants.com/grant-budgets-budgeting-for-multiple-year-grants/.

Following these guidelines can help keep your budget from raising eyebrows:

- ✓ Check your math! Budgets that don't add up are often cited as a reason for grant turndowns. Always create your budgets in Excel or another spreadsheet program, even if you eventually copy them into a Word document or online grant application. (If you don't know how to use Excel, start with some free tutorials online, or ask a friendly colleague to teach you the basics of creating formulas.)

- ✓ Comply with all funder rules regarding non-allowable costs and overhead. However, if a funder limits overhead to a certain percentage (such as 10%), consult with your nonprofit's financial directors to make sure that the project can still be carried out with this level of overhead recovery.

- ✓ Make sure that each line item cost is in a reasonable range, and that the overall project budget would allow you to accomplish the objectives you propose. Not asking for enough money to adequately do the work you propose to do can be as much of a red flag as citing an unreasonably high cost of a specific line item.

- ✓ Make an effort to show that your organization, partners and other funders will provide matching or supplemental funds to support the project. Work with the program and finance staff to determine how your organization will be contributing to the project, whether through cash support or through in-kind contributions.

6. Document that your nonprofit's board provides strong support — including, ideally, 100% board giving.

To learn how foundation leaders think, check out this ten-minute video from Movie Mondays featuring Craig Stewart, the president of the Apex/Bruce & Jolene McCaw Family Foundation – http://www.501videos.com/mm2012/07/mm_3_funder.html.

As Stewart explains, **grantmakers look for evidence that a nonprofit's board is truly committed to the organization.** Before a foundation will be willing to write a check to a nonprofit, **the foundation typically wants to see that the board members themselves are also writing checks**. They want to know that each board member prioritizes this particular nonprofit above others.

As a grant proposal writer, you don't necessarily have much control over how the board interacts with the nonprofit's Executive Director and Development Director — and, indeed, whether 100% of the board does give. But **you can create proposal documents that demonstrate your board's commitment to the organization**, presenting this information in the best possible light (while still being accurate).

One piece of paper that can make or break your grant proposal is the board giving statement. This statement is made in response to funders asking what percentage of the board has made a financial contribution in the current or prior year.

Follow these tips for creating the board giving statement:

- ✓ Work with your organization's Development Director or individual gifts staffer to write the board giving statement. No board is perfect, and if you find that your board falls short on the 100% board giving ideal, you should briefly explain extenuating circumstances as seems appropriate.

- ✓ Along with the basic financial information documenting board members' direct cash donations to the organization, include supplemental detail that helps to tell the full story of board commitment. You can include quotes from board members about why they value serving on your board, and data on how board members have advanced the nonprofit in recent years (such as number of private fundraising events hosted by board members).

- ✓ Even if the funder doesn't ask for this information, it can be advisable to include it, either in the section of the proposal that provides background information about your nonprofit or in a stand-alone one-page document.

7. Follow up assiduously after you submit the proposal, including providing prompt responses to any questions from the funder and seeking to revise and resubmit proposals that are turned down.

Your job isn't done when you hit "submit" on the online application or when you put the proposal in the mailbox. **Tenacious follow-up can get you funded.**

While being respectful of a program officer's time and tuned into social cues, you can persistently track progress of your proposal and be ready to address issues that come up along the way from the funder's receipt of the proposal to its ultimate funding decision.

Many successful grant professionals have the habit of **contacting the funder to confirm that they received the proposal and ask if there were any initial questions about the project**. You can do this follow-up about a week after submitting the proposal. When program officers have questions, do everything in your power to get those questions answered – not least because questions are a sign that the funder is seriously considering your application.

You might be able to find out the date of the board meeting at which the proposal will be considered. Depending on your rapport with the program officer, you can then plan to follow up shortly after this board meeting to ask about the status of the application.

If the application was funded, your job is to say thank you! But if it was not funded, then **you can find out what went wrong and if it can be fixed.**

Among the "fixable" reasons that a proposal might be turned down for funding are:

- ✓ The funder simply didn't have enough money to support all eligible projects. Some private foundations have more money to distribute early in the fiscal year, so a program officer might advise you to re-submit the proposal for the first board meeting of the next year.

- ✓ Your proposal didn't comply with guidelines or didn't make a compelling case for funding. If this is the case for you, honestly assess whether these issues can be addressed in order to re-submit a more competitive version of your proposal. In the best scenario, the program officer will tell you candidly if it will be possible to modify the proposal to be a better fit for the foundation.

- ✓ Program staff or trustees liked the overall application, but didn't want to support one part of the project. In some cases, a foundation will turn down a proposal because certain budget line items (anything from staff training to software upgrades) raised a red flag. Simply removing these line items from the budget and project plan can get your proposal approved in a future funding round.