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Sure Ways to Get Your Grant ... And Other Words of Advice

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by Laura Westrup

Making your grant application stand out from the mountain of other submitted proposals has always been a major concern for the grant writer. Competition for the same limited funds is usually fierce. And with the advent of high-tech GIS mapping, digital photography and charting abilities, many grant applications are chock full of incredibly well-designed graphics and other visuals, raising the bar even higher. This article offers advice on researching and preparing a winning application.

Defining Grants

Grants are funding programs created by an agency or organization to target an end-user or beneficiary of the funds. In the broadest sense, grants provide funding for agencies or groups for alternative services, facilities, innovative programs or research. Some programs require matching funds or may have narrow eligibility requirements. Governmental grants have been used frequently by local agencies to finance capital projects, such as the acquisition of land and development of capital improvements, equipment purchases, or planning and research for public purposes. Generally maintenance and operations funding is not available either through government or corporate grant sources and can be more difficult to locate and secure.

When preparing a grant application for either an acquisition or development project, it is essential to take into account the ongoing maintenance and operating costs of the suggested project. Before seeking the grant funds, consider whether the existing operating budget can absorb these costs and/or where the funding will come from to appropriately maintain the property and provide the services.

Review the Requirements

Nonprofit organizations and foundations may create endowments to fund those ongoing needs through a competitive process. In this manner, grant funds from different sources may be used to work together.

Take the time to review a grant application carefully. Ask yourself, does the scope of my project best fit the criteria of this grant? Or are you trying to make your project fit the scope of the grant? Either way, look closely at the requirements of the grant application for the time frame, budgets and other project restrictions. Is there a matching funds requirement, and if so, who are the acceptable partners? Can the match be in-lieu contributions, such as planning, project management, design and development aspects? Ask yourself if your agency is able to afford to "front end" the funding for the project, knowing that the grant operates primarily through reimbursements. Moreover, can your agency afford the staff time needed to prepare the grant application and, if successful, administer the project? Some grant proposals require a statement of future commitment that describes how the program will be funded once the grant is terminated.

Jan Stohr, executive director of the Sacramento-based Nonprofit Resource Center, has some helpful advice for grant seekers:

"Keep the proposal simple, make it concise, be sure it adheres to the funder's guidelines and be sure that your proposed project meets the mission and goals of the funding agency."

First Steps to Raising Money

Often, grant seekers begin the process with questions such as: "What are my chances of getting funded?" Or "How do I increase my chances of having my project or program funded by a competitive grant?" And "How do I shortcut the process to find a grant funder most apt to fund my project?" Going after the limited funding sources and dollars available can appear overwhelming. However difficult the process, though, taking the first step is always the hardest. Start with the following four key steps:

1. Draft a potential list of funders. Determine what public agencies (federal, state and local), foundations, corporations and community groups have interests and goals similar to those of your city. Start by asking colleagues, past grantees, community groups or nonprofit organizations where they found grant funding. Speaking directly to a grant officer is also helpful.
2. Refine the list to include agencies (and divisions) that provide the support you need or who are most likely to fund projects in your subject field or geographic area. Identify the project and/or program officer from a foundation who oversees your particular area of interest. Some focus on health, for instance; others focus on community development or other fields.
3. Become familiar with the funder's goals, mission statement, board of directors, assets, annual report, application procedures, funding history and their most recently funded projects that closely match your proposed project's criteria.
4. Create and use a list of key words and phrases associated with your project for your online searches. These could include urban centers, diverse populations, solar energy, outreach programs, redevelopment and more.

Identifying Potential Funders

How do you identify organizations that fund public agency projects? After speaking to your colleagues, conduct a search of funders on the Internet. Suggested sites include Coyote Communications (www.coyotecom.com/tips.html), GuideStar (www.guidestar.org) and Network for Good (www.comsearch.net). After you've done a preliminary search, locate the funder's website and look for their annual report. By matching your project with the potential funding source's mission statement, you'll be able to quickly determine if it's a good fit.

You may also want to look at foundations for your grant funding. The Foundation Center (<http://fdncenter.org/funders>) is a highly respected resource for obtaining information on foundations through its various publications and services.

Before placing a stamp on your proposal's envelope, review this checklist to see if your proposal is complete.

DO!

- Make sure the rest of your staff is on board prior to submitting the grant proposal.
- Ask for assistance from the project officer.
- Submit a legible and complete proposal.
- Submit a proposal that is project ready when the funds materialize.
- Explain how your idea, project or program fits with the granting agency's funding initiatives or mission, especially if the funder knows little about local government initiatives.
- Answer all the questions and follow the directions in the proposal guidelines.
- Demonstrate how your proposed project will be *solving* a community problem.
- Make the proposal memorable, interesting and easy to read. Never make the reader do extra work flipping through your application from one section to another.
- Create smooth transitions between sections. Use subheads. Maintain a balance between conciseness and detail. Use the terms that are used in the guideline.
- Be creative and always tailor your request to that of the individual funder.

- Be organized and give concrete examples.
- Emphasize content over writing style.
- Be specific about the types of support your partners will provide.

DON'T!

- Turn in documents after the deadline.
- Leave things until the last minute.
- Fail to provide secured matching funds.
- Fax or e-mail the application unless doing so is acceptable to the granting agency and you are able to verify that the grant proposal was received.
- Be overly ambitious with your project proposal.
- Supply more information than is requested.
- Be afraid to resubmit a previously unfunded proposal (but revise it after first obtaining the reviewers' comments and the funder's recommendation).
- Disregard the needed environmental requirements or the timeline to complete the environmental review process.
- Be vague and noncommittal.

As you can imagine, evaluators are looking to get the largest return for their investment. So how will your proposal be evaluated against other submittals? Usually, ranking criteria are described in the application guidelines, but there are some universal thoughts related to why proposals are rejected.

- The proposal had sections that were not complete or lacked supporting documentation.
- The applicant did not follow the guidelines provided by the funding agency.
- The project was inconsistent with the funder's mission or too large, too extensive or confusing.
- The project or program cited findings based on a shaky hypothesis or incomplete data. Statistical or demographic data were weak. In essence, the application lacked credibility.
- The problem was more complex than the proposer appeared to realize.
- The problem or project was not clearly defined or was weakly stated.
- The applicant did not have a strong enough track record to support the award.
- The project or program was not adequately or clearly explained.
- The proposal appeared too ambitious for the projected cost.
- There simply was not enough money to go around.
- The proposal had sections that were not complete or lacked supporting documentation.
- The application included errors in fact, mathematics, grammar and spelling.
- The application did not clearly articulate the problem or reason for requesting funding assistance.

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