



*Helping Organizations
Take the Next Step*

Finding the Perfect Grant: *Nine Keys to Successful Grant Writing and Development*

By Bill Peatman

A friend of mine just ventured into the world of online dating. When I asked her how it's going, she said it was "exhausting." "First," she said, "you have to create a profile that will appeal to someone you might find attractive, then you have to exchange messages to see if you are both compatible and interested in dating, and finally you still have to decide if you want to invest the time and energy and try to build a relationship."

Hmm, I thought. It sounds a lot like grant writing.

The first step in successful grant writing is searching for grant makers that will find your organization attractive. That's not as simple as it might seem. For example, if your organization teaches parenting skills for low income families, a foundation whose mission is "child health and welfare," may or may not be a good fit. You won't know before doing some digging. It's important to study what programs and organizations the foundation has funded in the past. And express your program, objectives, and outcomes in language that the grant maker will understand and value. The first step in forming a relationship is finding out if both parties have enough in common to go forward. In dating, this means finding common interests, hobbies, and goals. For nonprofits and grant makers, this means sharing a common mission. If you can, through a Letter of Inquiry or through an Executive Overview, convey your request in language that leads the funding agency to say "I would like to get to know you," you are likely to get to the next stage. This means they place your letter or application in the "to be considered" pile instead of the, um, other pile.

Once the grant maker says "tell me more," the next messages you exchange will be your grant proposal. The proposal is your opportunity to build on that positive first encounter. How do you do it? Well, the principals of researching and writing a successful grant proposal aren't that different from the principles involved in

starting any successful relationship. Here are nine tips for finding the perfect grant:

1. Make a great first impression

Many grant writing experts recommend writing your executive summary after you've completed the entire proposal. Why? Because then you can clearly outline what you're asking for, why, and how it fits with the funding organization's mission. If you write the overview first, you're more likely to talk about your organization and programs, and not address the objectives of the foundation you're applying to. If you write the executive summary last, it's more likely to be a concise overview of the rest of the proposal. If you want to understand more about the components of grant proposals, view samples, and download templates, visit Non-profit Guides (npguides.org).

2. Don't put all your eggs in one basket

Don't be shy about asking for funds from multiple sources. Remember that most funding agencies want to see that you are seeking funds from multiple donors. They don't want to be entirely responsible for your organization or program. Look far and wide. In many communities, major sources of funds for nonprofits are well known. It can be easy to think that you've covered all your options with a few requests to known entities. It is likely that there are many more local, regional and national funding sources dedicated to your mission, from small family foundations to large corporate programs. Many of these resources are listed on online resources such as Guidestar (guidestar.org) and The Foundation Center (foundationcenter.org). You can search by city, click on foundations, and open their IRS 990 tax statements to see what organizations they've donated to, and how much they gave.

3. Don't talk too much about yourself

Yes, you need to be able to introduce your organization, present its compelling characteristics, and do so in a way that makes it appealing to the funding organization. But too much self-promotion will have the same effect on grant makers as it does on a date. Think about it, grant review committee members read dozens of proposals in a single session. They will quickly scan for the information they're looking for in language that they understand. If your statement of need begins with eight pages about your wildly successful organization, they will lose interest. Clear, concise writing, without jargon or superlatives will be far more effective than hyperbole.

4. Don't make promises you can't keep

In the television show “Seinfeld,” George Costanza, who was usually unemployed, would tell women he was an architect to try to impress them. George stayed single. Don’t pretend to be someone you’re not. If a foundation supports climate change solutions, and your organization supports sustainable building practices, you can likely tie your programs to climate change. But if your organization supports job training for the homeless, don’t bother applying for this grant.

5. Don’t be too needy

Most foundations want to effect change, not rescue struggling organizations. Whenever possible, use measurable outcomes to demonstrate how your organization is positively impacting not just clients and participants, and how helping these people benefits the overall community. Yes, a recovery program can save the life of an addict. In addition, that saved life is one less person at risk of unemployment, incarceration, and other social ills. It’s about the community’s needs, not your organization’s needs.

6. Be on time

Nothing is worse than being late for a date. Attention to detail—deadlines, formatting requirements, and other application guidelines—is critical. Failure to do so indicates that you don’t take the foundation and its internal processes seriously, or worse, it may appear that you are not organized enough to successfully run a program. Read the requirements carefully and make sure that you comply with all of them.

7. Don’t make assumptions

One thing I’ve heard over and over again from funders is that nonprofits should never assume the funding organizations know you. Even if a foundation has funded you before, don’t be too casual or familiar, and don’t skip any application steps. Grant committees can change. Be professional and be complete. Even if you have a champion or two in a foundation, they can’t readily defend you if you haven’t complied with the foundation’s proposal requirements, or if it looks like you believe you have funding locked up.

8. Focus on the positive

Foundations *want* to give money to organizations that fulfill the foundation’s mission. If you write your proposal in a way that shows your organization’s work compliments the foundation’s mission, you are more likely to be successful.

9. Don’t say goodbye, say see you next year

If you are turned down by a foundation, first ask why. Is due to simply to lack of funds? Was there something they felt was off target in your

program's objectives? Was there some technical detail amiss in your proposal? It is always a good idea to ask, and to ask if you should reapply next year. If the answer is "yes," you've already taken the first step in building a relationship. If they say no, then you know its time to move on.

Finding the perfect grant takes a lot of work, but it can be done. Foundations and their missions aren't hard to find. Just as you are looking for the right match, so are most funding organizations. With the right profile, messages, and approach, you're far more likely to find the right partner for your nonprofit.

Do you need help researching and writing successful grants and proposals? Bill Peatman, a Marketing Consultant with NewLevel Group, LLC, can assist you with developing successful grants and fundraising proposals. He can be reached at (707) 255-5555 x 106 or bpeatman@newlevelgroup.com.