Best Practices in Grant Writing

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TAGS:

Grants
Fundraising

Summary:

Grant giving organizations can provide restricted funding for a particular project or program, or unrestricted funding to help cover the overhead costs of running the organization. This list shares strategies for successful grant writing and outlines the typical elements of a funding proposal.

Top Five Tips for Successful Grant Writing

Only 7% of "cold" proposals are funded, so make yourself known. Before writing anything to anyone, do your research on how well the grantmaking organization "fits" your vision. If there's a strong fit, then try to make direct contact with someone there to ask questions about their process and how much you can request.

Review and follow the exact instructions described in the application. If the foundation wants you to deliver five copies of each proposal, each with three staples across the top, and a budget written in fluorescent ink, to its office via camel in the middle of the night only on Leap Day every four years, then that's what you'll do. Not following directions is one of the primary reasons grants are not funded. Make a checklist and check it twice!

Have a clear project budget. Your budget should tie logically to the "How" activities described in your proposal. If the expenses don't match the activities, that can raise doubts about your ability to plan and carry out your project. Ask for help from a colleague, volunteer, or board member if you need it.

Your familiarity can breed confusion for newcomers . Have someone who is totally unfamiliar with your project read it and ask questions. Put the answers to those questions directly into your proposal—explain in detail anything that is unclear to someone who doesn't know your project as intimately as you do. And remember: beware the acronym!

Proofread. Spellcheck. Accept tracked changes. Leave time for careful review by two pairs of eyes. Seems simple, yet these kinds of careless mistakes are popular routes to the decline pile. Whenever possible, submit electronic documents in PDF format—and don't forget to take extra care with the spelling and grammar in email subject lines.

Typical Elements of a Funding Proposal

Executive Summary

The summary is a quick view for the funder to understand at a glance what you are seeking. At the beginning of a proposal, write a short summary of what you are proposing. The summary can be as short as a couple of sentences, but no longer than one page. Make sure it includes a brief description of the project, your organization's mission and vision, what makes you valuable, the amount you're requesting, and the timeframe in which you intend to use the grant.

Statement of Need

This is the meat of grant proposals; it's where you must convince the funder that what you propose to do is important and that your organization is the right one to do it. Assume that the reader does not know much about the issue or subject. Explain why the issue is important. It is also a good practice to have an overview of the population you serve: How many students? What are the demographics? What percentage of the student body qualifies for free and reduced lunch?

Goals and Objectives

What does your organization plan to do about the problem? This is the section where you outline your theory of change. How does the work you do solve the problem you

are addressing? What will change as a result of this work? Spell out specific achievable objectives and results that the grant support will enable you to carry out. Make sure to include the project timeline.

Methods and Strategies

Spell out *how* you will achieve the goals and objectives you've set out earlier. This can be in the form of a work plan or a bulleted list of action items that you and your team will accomplish.

Evaluation

How will you assess your program's accomplishments? How will you make sure this project is sustainable over time? Funders want to know that their dollars actually did some good. So decide now how you will evaluate the impact of your project. Include what records you will keep or data you will collect, and how you will use that data. If the data collection costs money, be sure to include that cost in your budget.

Budget

Any grant proposal or request should include a detailed budget for the project. It is important to build in staff time for meeting, planning, and executing the project, materials or capital expenses, and any other expenses you will incur over the course of the project. Many funders use the 5-50 rule of thumb to gauge whether their funding will make a significant impact, but not leave a program disproportionately reliant on their funds. So think about targeting grants that are no less than 5% and no more than 50% of your project's budget.

Other Sources of Funding

Have you gotten committed funds from other sources? Or have you asked other sources? Most funders do not wish to be the sole or primary source of support for a project. Be sure to mention in-kind contributions you expect, such as meeting space or equipment. Is this a pilot project with a limited timeline? Or will it go into the future? If so, how do you plan to fund it over time? How will you sustain it over the long haul? Do you have a diverse range of types of support and a strategy for gaining support (direct and in-kind) from different kinds of givers?

Organizational Information

In a few paragraphs, explain what your organization does and why the funder can trust it to use the requested funds responsibly and effectively. Give a short history of your organization: State its mission, the population it serves, and an overview of its

track record in achieving its mission. Describe or list your programs and the background of program leadership. Be complete in this part of your proposal even if you know the funder or have gotten grants from this grantmaker before. If space allows, here's where you might add an anecdote/story of success that shows the power of the project's impact.

Cover Letter

The cover letter is best written once you have all the other pieces in place. It is a good practice to make sure the letter is formatted beautifully, as this is the first impression your donors will have. The cover letter is also a good place to remind readers of previous funding, conversations, or other specifics of your professional relationship.

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