WRITING A WINNING PROPOSAL

For some reason, the idea of writing a grant proposal scares many people. In truth there is nothing mysterious or alarming about the process. A grant proposal does not need to be a literary masterpiece or a dry piece of technical writing. A proposal is nothing more than a tool to help your organization clarify and communicate its program.

The role of a grant proposal is to answer the funder's questions about your organization. And funders ask exactly the same things you would ask if someone solicited money from you: Why do you need this money? What are you going to do with it? Why should I give my money to you instead of to someone else? How will I know you used the money effectively?

An Opportunity for Planning

Obviously, the primary function of a grant proposal is to secure funds for your organization. But writing a grant proposal also presents your group with another rare opportunity -- the chance to stop and think about precisely how to carry out the organization's mission.

Before you even turn on your computer, you must plan in detail exactly what the organization intends to do, who will do it, how they will do it, what resources they will require, and what results they expect. This is not something that can be done by the proposal writer alone. The planning must be accomplished with the people who will direct and implement your organization's program.

Any fuzzy thinking, any areas in which you haven't quite figured out what to do, will show up in your grant proposal. While an adroit writer can probably camouflage these weaknesses, that's not necessarily a good idea. It is essential that what your group is "offering" and what the funder understands they are "buying" is the same thing.

Answering Questions

Ideally, when prospective funders finish reading your proposal their only question should be "Now, where did I put my checkbook? A proposal that leaves important issues dangling is in trouble; a proposal that raises more questions than it settles is probably doomed. A good grant proposal should answer a series of questions:

Who are you? What's the full name of your organization? Where are you located? What geographic area and what constituency do you serve? What are your mission and goals? How long have you been operating? What have you achieved? Can you demonstrate strong community support for your program? (This is especially important if your organization is young and lacks a track record.)

Is your organization, program or project really needed? What needs will you meet for the community? Can you document that your organization is meeting an unmet need? Why is your organization uniquely suited to address this need?

What is your plan to meet these needs? What activities do you plan to undertake? What is your timeline for these activities? What resources will you require to implement the plan, including money, staffing, volunteers, and equipment? What will be the responsibilities and qualifications of the key staff or volunteers who will implement the plan?

What specific results do you anticipate? If your program succeeds, what accomplishments will you be able to demonstrate in six months? In a year from your start? Funders require measurable objectives.

How will you evaluate your efforts? You need to figure this out before you embark on your project or program. The measurable goals you have identified for your work will make it easier to evaluate. Foundations seem to be sincerely interested in not only how well you met your own expectations, but also in how and why you may have fallen short of your goals. Most do not consider this as failure, but as proof that your organization learned something by taking action that you did not know when you were planning your activity. Foundations also like to share the results of your learning -- successes and disappointments -- with other grantee organizations that may benefit from it.

Have you prepared a comprehensive budget? If staff salaries comprise part of the budget, did you mention those staff members in the proposal itself? Is every item self-explanatory?

Have you secured enough funding to carry out your plan? In each proposal, you will ask a funder for a specific amount of money. Generally this is not enough to implement your entire program. Furthermore, funders often give you less than you request. Can you show that you have approached or plan to approach other funding sources? How will you fund the program next year?

Have you attached the appropriate supporting documents? These would include a copy of your organization's IRS tax-exempt ruling; copies of newsletters or an annual report if your organization has these; brief profiles of staff or volunteers whose credentials are important to the proposal; copies of two or three newspaper articles, letters of support or other items that might demonstrate the support your organization enjoys in the community; and questionnaires that you may use in your evaluation. Funders are much more impressed by evidence that you have been thoughtful in your choice of attachments than by the volume of paper you send.

Follow the Guidelines

Most foundations have guidelines that tell you how to format your request and when to submit it. Follow them! Few things irritate foundation folk more quickly than ignoring their directions. It is equally important to make sure that your grant request fits within the guidelines in terms of the foundation's field of interest and the size of grant you are seeking.

Some funders give grants as small as $50, some give in the S100 to $5,000 range, and some give only in the six-figure range. Remember, it is just as much work to pursue a small grant as a larger one. Think carefully about whether it is worth the time and effort to solicit, administer and report on a tiny grant.

On the other hand, there is such a thing as too much money. A small or fledgling grassroots group could be swamped by the sudden increase in activity, hiring, administration and oversight responsibility required by a $100,000 grant. Make sure your grant request fits the funder's guidelines and your own realistic needs and budget.

Proposal Structure

Unfortunately, there is no single model or format for a winning proposal. While each proposal should contain the elements described below, the structure of your proposal will vary depending on the requirements of specific funders and the program or project for which you seek funding. A basic rule is to keep the proposal as clear and concise as possible. Under 10 pages in length is best.

The following format, or a variation of it, is generally appropriate.

Summary: One page that provides a compact yet thorough description of the proposal. The summary (sometimes called the executive summary) includes the analysis of the problem, proposed strategy, plan of action, intended results, funding request, and grant period (for example, your organization's fiscal year.) Although this is the first page of the proposal, you should write it after you have written and refined the full proposal. The summary may be the only page busy funders actually read!

Need: A page or two that demonstrates why your program is needed. This should not be a dissertation on poverty, but a compelling and factual description of the needs your program will address.

Workplan: This is the heart of the proposal. What do you propose to do and how do you plan to achieve it? Finance it? Evaluate it? What are your measurable objectives? This should be the longest section in the proposal.

Credentials: Describe your organization and why you are qualified to conduct this program or project. What are the qualifications of the key people who will be involved?

Budget: Clear and self-explanatory. One page is best.

Request: In the final paragraph or two, reiterate the "ask"—How much you seek, from whom, for what purpose, during what period of time. The funder should be able to glance at this and know exactly what you want.

Cover Letter

The first thing the funder will read -- and the last thing you should write -- is the cover letter. This one- or two-page letter provides you with your first and in some cases only chance to engage the reader.

Many funders are so inundated with requests that if your cover letter gives them an opportunity to decline your request, they will happily take it. Such opportunities could include misspelling the foundation's or foundation officer's name, babbling on for paragraphs without communicating the purpose of the proposal, or making a request that is so unsuitable in size or content that it's clear you did not bother to research the foundation's guidelines.

The cover letter should accomplish the following:

— introduce the reader to your organization

— state the need or objective this grant would address

— ask for a specific amount over a specific time frame

— suggest why you approached this particular donor

— thank the funder for considering your request.

The cover letter should be on your organization's letterhead and signed by the executive director or jointly by the director and the Board chair. Address the letter to executive director of the foundation or, in the case of a large national foundation, the program officer who is in charge of the program area under which your organization's mission would best fit, e.g. urban poverty, economic development, etc.

Tips

- **Be sure to ask for money.** Some proposals meander politely around the question of money. These are the proposals that don't get funded. You must ask for a specific amount of money -- in the cover letter, in the proposal summary or introduction, and in the concluding paragraphs.

- **Be sure to ask for enough money!** Foundations won't think you're greedy if you have a substantial budget; they'll think you're unrealistic if your budget isn't adequate. Ask the foundation for as much as is reasonable considering their giving parameters.

- **Your organization's mission should drive the funding, not the other way around.** Be sure your organization carries out its mission and does what its constituency needs it to do, rather than what donors will fund you to do. In some cases, foundations will tell you that they won't support the program you proposed, but they would fund you if you would undertake a different program that is more in line with the foundation's interests. Think carefully before committing your organization to such an agreement.

- **Funders are interested in the needs you meet, not the needs you have.** When discussing why a grant is needed, focus on what it will do for your community and your constituency, not for your organization.

- **Make it easy to read.** Your proposal should be easy on the eyes, with lots of margins and white space, and appropriate headlines or bullets to organize the text.

- **Avoid jargon.** A grant proposal should be easily understood by anyone who reads it, regardless of their familiarity with the field in which you work. Make a conscious effort to describe your organization's mission and activities without using jargon, technical terms, initials, or abbreviations. Ask a friend who does not work with you to read one of your proposals and point out any jargon that slipped past you.

- **Avoid leftovers.** It's a good idea to develop a core proposal that can be adapted to various funding requests. However, when you adapt the proposal to send to a new funder, make sure the previous funder's name is not lingering somewhere in the text.

- **Let it rest.** When you finish the proposal, put it away for a few days. Even better, give it to other people to read and critique. You will be able to review and revise the proposal much more effectively after a few days' vacation from it. Of course, this means you must write the first draft well in advance of the deadline -- a difficult goal for many community-based organizations to achieve.

- **Don't forget the passion.** Something drew you to this work in the first place. Let that zeal show in your writing. Your task is to convince a funder that your organization has identified a vital need and is qualified to meet it. Your group's commitment to the issues is one reason why the funder should select you from among all the other applicants.