NAILING YOUR NEXT GRANT PROPOSAL

4 ways to get the grantmaker to say 'Yes!' to your nonprofit's next grant application

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When you step back to look at an approved grant application — regardless of what type of grantmaker it was sent to, what the subject matter is or who wrote it — there are *almost* always three common elements found within the successful applications.

Regardless of length or format, successful applications have a clearly articulated need that the project/program will address, SMART objectives and a definition of what success looks like. Those three elements are a winning combination for the success of a grant application, but there is actually one additional key element for you to consider for each grant application to ensure that you submit the most competitive application possible each time: relationships.

Here are four ways that I have found your nonprofit can get an absolute "Yes!" from the grantmaker when you submit your application:

1. REACH OUT BEFORE WRITING THE APPLICATION

If a grantmaker has any capacity and/or preference for communication with potential grantees and you do not reach out to them to clarify your understanding of their guidelines and your fit within them, you are missing a key opportunity to increase your competitiveness in the process.

For each grant that you pursue, when you are conducting your grantmaker research, you should look for the grantmaker's preferences and capacity for how you as a potential applicant can reach out to ask questions if you have any about their process. The outreach, whether via phone or email, also gives you the opportunity to get input on whether or not the reason you think you are a strong fit resonates with the grantmaker. If you are able to learn that the grant isn't as good of a fit as you initially believed it to be based on your previous research, the grantmaker has actually done you a great favor and saved you the time and effort that you would have spent on an application. You can instead shift your focus to writing to grantmakers in which you are more likely to be successful.

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2. CLEARLY ARTICULATE WHAT THE NEED IS THAT YOU PLAN TO ADDRESS

Your grantmaker is passionate about the type of work that it funds, and it is likely dangerously knowledgeable about the field as a whole that you are working in. Despite what its existing knowledge may be, you should not assume its specific knowledge about your organization's target audience's needs.

Rather, you need to present a clear need statement about your specific type of work within the priority area that the grantmaker funds. You need to connect the dots for the grantmaker on how you might use large data sources, such as how the American Community Survey connects to your local United Way's need survey or your own organization's focus group data.

Then, regardless of what sources you are gathering your data from, be sure to properly cite that data, whether narratively or in a footnote so that your grantmaker/reviewer is never left wondering… "According to whom?"

> "The grantmaker should have a clear understanding of what success/impact will look like as a result of its support."

3. WRITE SMART OBJECTIVES

You should always use a SMART objective to monitor your progress. A SMART objective is:

- Specific: Provide the "who" and "what" of your program activities. The greater the specificity, the greater the measurability.

- Measurable: Quantify the amount of change expected. It is impossible to determine whether objectives have been met unless they can be measured.

- Achievable: Your program goals must be attainable within a given time frame, and it must be clear to reviewers how you plan to achieve them.

- Relevant/Realistic: Accurately address the scope of the problem and the programmatic steps that you will implement to solve the problem.

- Timely: Provide a time frame indicating when the objective will be measured or a deadline for the objective to be met by.

4. DEFINE WHAT SUCCESS WILL
LOOK LIKE FOR THE GRANTMAKER

What does success look like with the grantmaker's $500, $10,000, $50,000 or even $500,000? The grantmaker should have a clear understanding of what success/impact will look like as a result of its support. Without that message being shared with the grantmaker in your proposal, you will struggle with how to circle back during the grant award period and after it is done to report on your progress and success if you don't have a clear idea of where you want to end up.

This definition of success is more of a soundbite of an idea that you would want the grantmaker to remember if it was discussing the proposal with another decision-maker. It is not to take the place of all the details of the evaluation section.

Addressing these four elements for every grant proposal is the best way to submit a competitive application. While there is no guarantee for grant-writing success since there are always elements of the decision-making process we can't control as grant professionals (the competitiveness of other proposals, the relationships the other applicants have with the grantmaker, etc), the way we tell and write about the story of our organization is in our control, and these four tips are the key to your success in getting a "Yes!" from grantmakers.

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