



A new book describes what grant reviewers appreciate in a proposal

Grassroots grantwriting

by Andy Robinson

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— Martin Teitel
CS Fund

For novice proposal writers, the grant-making process is often cloaked in mystery. A new book, *Grassroots Grants: An Activist's Guide to Proposal Writing*, is designed to help unravel the mystery. The book includes comments from forty foundation officers who fund groups working for social and economic justice, human rights, and environmental conservation. Among the questions they answered: "What grabs your attention in a grant proposal? What really annoys you? If you could give grantseekers one piece of advice, what would it be?" Their most common suggestions are based on common sense.

Do your homework

Nearly half the foundation staff surveyed offered this as their number one piece of advice. Ellen Furnari, formerly of the Ben & Jerry's Foundation, tells a typical story. "Sixty to seventy percent of the proposals we receive don't match our guidelines," she says. "Fifty percent miss by a wide margin. We need to respond respectfully, and it costs staff time to respond to all these people. We try to limit our administrative costs to 10% of our budget, and a lot of our time is absorbed saying 'no.'"

Martin Teitel of the CS Fund echoes this concern. "We get dozens of proposals from organizations that clearly never did a lick of homework, and waste our time and the precious funds of their members sending out hopeless proposals to the wrong funders. I often wonder if these same people try to buy their groceries in hardware stores."

Disregard of guidelines ranges from the merely annoying to the comical. "We recently had a Youth Hunting Club apply for a grant," says Joy Palmer of the Headwaters Fund. "The purpose was to expose inner city youth to nature by teaching them how to hunt. Because social change is clearly defined as a priority in our mission and our grant guidelines, this was not an appropriate request for funding."

Grants officers emphasize basic research: grantseekers should always request and study the foundation's guidelines and annual

report before submitting their proposal. Pam Rogers of the Haymarket People's Fund takes this idea further, offering grantseekers a method to weigh their work against the foundation's priorities. "Try to figure out where your potential funding source is coming from: how do they see the world?" she says. "Now, think about your programs — which most closely fit the foundation's interests? Can you describe your program with their words and feel that your integrity is intact?"

Develop professional relationships with foundation staff

Not surprisingly, the first step in building good relationships involves homework — spelling names correctly, keeping track of staff changes, and so forth. "Our foundation used to be named Ira-Hiti, a Native American word," says Quincey Tompkins Imhoff of the Foundation for Deep Ecology. "It was changed four years ago, yet we still get mail addressed to Mr. Ira Hiti — 'Dear Mr. Hiti'..."

Good relationships are also fostered through nuts-and-bolts suggestions like, "If appropriate, call before you submit your proposal," and "Try to arrange meetings with grantmakers." Jon Jensen of the George Gund Foundation speaks to the value of good telephone relations. "I can think of a number of proposals I would have declined," he says, "without first having had a phone conversation and forming a positive opinion about the person on the other end of the line." Having said that, be aware that not all foundation staff desire or appreciate phone calls — study the guidelines before you pick up the telephone.

Several other grants officers stress the importance of meeting with foundation staff. As John Tirman of Winston Foundation for World Peace suggests, "Making the call in person is infinitely better than sending in a proposal. Budget in trips to New York City and other funding centers." Charlotte Talberth of the Max and Anna Levinson Foundation turns this idea on its head, encouraging grantseekers to invite funders into their communities. "My most useful experience of the year," she says, "was going

uninvited to a meeting, which turned out to be for members only. Because I'd come a long way, they let me stay. There were about 150 activists present and I learned a tremendous amount. Including funders at activist meetings can be a good idea."

Of course, the presence of foundation staff can also change the tenor of these meetings. Professionalism means understanding and acknowledging the inherent inequities between grantmaker and grantseeker. As Stephen Viederman of the Jessie Smith Noyes Foundation points out, "Any relationship between funder and prospective grantee is a power relationship; one has access to money, the other needs money."

Given this situation, most foundation officers still prefer to be treated as peers, not lords and ladies of the manor. Martin Teitel is put off by, "People who use drippy, obsequious, beseeching language as if they are Mozart and I am the Duke of Salzburg. A little dignity looks good in a proposal!"

Be honest, clear, and concise

"When you write a grant, picture a person in a room with no windows, with proposals stacked everywhere," says Pam Rogers. "This person's entire job is to read proposals, day in and day out. Ask yourself: what can I do to make my organization's proposal stand out?"

While few grants officers work in windowless rooms, they do handle tons of paper. Foundations are besieged with unfocused, overly long proposals. (Jon Jensen compares his job to being "under an avalanche of information.") Katrin Verclas of the Ottinger Foundation says, "I am sometimes amazed by the confused and convoluted descriptions we get. Presumably, the applicants should be able to describe their work — but my experience has been otherwise!"

As a first step, grantseekers need to plan their programs as thoroughly and professionally as possible. "A grant request is a business plan," says John Powers of the Educational Foundation of America. "A non-profit should be just as business-like as a for-profit company, just as fiscally responsible, and just as capable of operating 'in the black.'"

As a next step, proposals should describe problems, but focus on solutions. Dan Petegorsky, formerly of the Peace Development Fund, offers an instructive anecdote. "I just reviewed 122 proposals on our youth docket, and nearly every one started with a litany of what's wrong with our society. Far fewer of them devoted the same amount of space to what they were doing to address these problems."

Finally, grantseekers should make their case as simply and clearly as they can. When asked what grabs her attention is a proposal, Nanette Silva of the Chicago Foundation for Women says, "Succinct, organized writing style. We want to be able to look at a proposal and figure out very quickly what you are asking for." Tia Oros of the Seventh Generation Fund favors, "Brevity, frankness, clarity, honesty, and innovation."

One last word: the quality of the proposal is seldom the critical factor in determining who wins the grant. Barbara Meyer of the Bert and Mary Meyer Foundation offers these words of hope to novices and people who just don't like to write. "For us, the proposal is only a small piece," she says. "Sometimes we get really unclear or unfocused proposals, because people are so busy carrying out their program that they don't stop long enough to think through the process of articulating what it is they do. When we visit, we discover the group and their work is outstanding. So we take the proposal lightly." ■

*Andy Robinson is a trainer and consultant based in Tucson, Arizona. A version of this article first appeared in **Foundation News and Commentary**. Andy's new book, **Grassroots Grants: An Activist's Guide to Proposal Writing**, is available from the Western States Center (see catalyst insert).*

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