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News Updates

Grants: Funding requests are flooding in

In this tough economy getting a grant has become even more difficult than usual, according to Diane Gedeon-Martin. She said she hasn't seen grant competition so tough since the 1980s. "We're in a severe downturn," she said. If your organization's request wasn't funded, she said, "It might not be the proposal. It might be the economy."

The president and founder of The Write Source, a Gladsbury, Conn., grant proposal firm, Gedeon-Martin presented "Winning Foundation Grants" at a recent international conference on fundraising.

Describing grant proposals as a sort of "fundraising term paper," Gedeon-Martin said the frantic fundraising environment following the September 11 attacks have caused problems for all organizations. So, many organizations are turning to grant proposals.

Of course, decades of giving research has shown that no more than 20 percent of all revenue to organizations comes from foundations and corporate grants. Working toward such gifts, however, can be less expensive and less labor intensive than typical fundraising events -- though that doesn't mean they're more likely to be successful.

New grant writers need to understand the proposal process and how to prepare funding requests, she said. It involves identifying the right potential funders, developing the proposal components, reviewing different types of proposals, and examining reasons why some proposals worked and others didn't.

The logical first step is to check whether the foundation is even accepting applications for funding. Send a letter on stationery (not a letter of intent) to find a foundation's guidelines. "You have to have a match with their guidelines" to be considered for a grant, Gedeon-Martin said.

Though it should be basic for organizations to research what funders' guidelines stipulate about their support areas, the current economic situation has muddied the waters. Gedeon-Martin said that organizations are expressing how desperate circumstances are right now by submitting requests where there's no solid match with what the foundation supports. "There's unbelievable amounts of garbage (grant requests) coming in," she said.

The inevitable question about asking for operating support arose from the audience. Gedeon-Martin explained that while some foundations might make gifts of operating support, they usually come after an organization has established its credibility and completed foundation-supported projects successfully.

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Gedeon-Martin offered a template of the components of a grant proposal. A cover letter is key, though a title page is optional. Keep the summary to one page. Other important components include: background of organization; need statement; project description; evaluation; future or continued funding; budget; and attachments.

The need statement, she said, should answer the basic questions of what is the specific problem that a project addresses, and how the need was identified. Supporting evidence should include statistics from local agencies as well as research into the root cause of the problem. The need statement should be no longer than three pages, with an opening paragraph briefly describing the problem followed by paragraphs describing the need and how the organization's mission ties into solving the problem.

Though writing in the first person is fine in a cover letter, the need statement narrative must be in the third person, she said. The closing paragraph of the need statement should set the tone for the subsequent project description section.

The project description describes the goals and objectives, activities and responsibilities of the project. Goals are long-term, she noted; objectives are generally more short-term and can be more specific than a goal. Objectives should adhere to the SMART model: Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, Time-specific. Most skimmers, she said, go straight to the goals and objectives.

The program description should enable the grantor to visualize the project and convince the reader that the agency knows what it is doing. It should provide a work plan and a time-frame.

The program evaluation is an important component of any proposal, she added, and most funders require it. It shows the steps the organization will take to determine whether the project was worthwhile and help to understand what works, and what doesn't.

Another possible component is a publicity plan, which is particularly required by corporate funders. While public and private foundations, like corporate funders, are looking for results from the programs they fund, they don't always want their name in print inspiring other organizations with programs that don't match their interests to come calling.

While a committee may be necessary for organizations to focus on their programs goals and needs, there should be only one writer for a grant request, Gedeon-Martin said.

Of course, timing can be crucial to the agency, especially when they're counting on funding in order to begin a program. Yet, foundations may use their own timetable. "Sometimes you're sitting in your office wondering," Gedeon-Martin said. "They're not obligated to do anything."

But when should an organization cut a request off the pending list? "At six months, I'd make a call," she said.