Tips for Successful Grants

Whether your proposal is for a private family foundation, a corporation, or a Federal agency, the basic ingredients of grants are: Need Statement, Project Narrative, Goals, Objectives, Tactics, Budget, Evaluation, and Sustainability. Think of these as pieces of a puzzle that fit together seamlessly.

Need Statement: What is the problem the grant will solve? Make sure you have clearly identified the need, how your organization is addressing (and to some degree meeting) the need, who else in your community is addressing the need (if anyone), and how your grant will gain traction in solving the problem.

Include compelling stories, but also statistical data to illustrate the need. Don't include assumptions or undocumented assertions. Focus on the geographic area you can serve. If your organization is not positioned to solve world hunger, make sure you include data concerning hunger in your service area and if relevant, how that data compares to national and international data.

Describe your organization's expertise in meeting the stated need and how your group is uniquely positioned to deliver the outcomes of the grant. Organizations that are successful in acquiring grants have a clear sense of their mission in the context of a clearly articulated social need. Demonstrate that your organization is fiscally sound, well-managed, and has a strong infrastructure in place. Describe how you provide important community service, and are respected by the community.

Project Narrative: Be brief but thorough. Have someone who knows little about your organization read this section. If he/she cannot understand how the project will develop, chances are your grant reviewer will not. Rework it until the reader has a clear understanding of how the project will come together and be delivered.

Goals, Objectives, and Tactics:

Goals: Tie your goals directly to the need statement.

Objectives: Write in quantifiable terms. Include realistic and measurable outcomes that can be accomplished within the timeframe indicated.

Tactics: Link tactics to your objectives (include a timeline of activities and build activities upon one another to reinforce the timeline). Explain your rationale for choosing these tactics and why these are the best methods for achieving your objective. Include research or expert opinion, past experiences, etc. Discuss the population to be served by the project, and how clients/constituents will be chosen, and again tie this population to your need statement. Finally, include a list of any facilities and equipment available for the project.

Budget: Be sure to fully fund the project in your grant proposal. Don't just request direct costs, but include shared costs and administrative costs in your proposal budget.

Direct Costs: Include staff salaries, payroll taxes, and benefits, supplies, materials, travel, etc. specifically associated with this project – the whole package.

Shared Costs: Include a percentage of costs that are shared by several programs and staff such as technology, rent/lease, parking, general supplies and equipment, etc.

Administrative Costs: Include a percentage of costs specifically for administrative purposes such as costs to manage the board of directors and accounting/bookkeeping.

Fully funding the project is essential to your ability to successfully implement and sustain the program beyond the life of the grant. If your organization carries the burden of providing in-kind contributions of shared and administrative costs, and you only request direct cost dollars from the funder, you will not be able to meet your grants goals without sacrificing other organizational programs. Request what you need.

Evaluation: Show how your objectives will be measured for success. Include both quantitative measurements and qualitative measurements. Examples of quantitative measurement are frequency, (100 individuals will participate on average 4 times per year), establishment of baselines, pretests, posttests. You may also compare two methods of achieving the same outcome, determine cause and effect (if we do this, we predict that will happen – and measure it). An example of qualitative measurement is to gain insight into patterns as the program unfolds. Focus groups, interviews, and surveys are qualitative approaches you may want to use.

Sustainability: Grant projects are generally part of the whole; not intended to solve the whole problem but to provide progress toward solving the issue(s). Grants typically build the capacity and expertise of an organization to continue to advance the organization toward mission fulfillment. Therefore, funders want to know that the work will continue to some degree beyond the life of the grant funding. Think about how your project can garner future funding through continuation grants, annual fundraising campaigns, fees for service, and/or earned revenue streams generated by the project. Have a plan in place and include your plan in your grant proposal.

Follow directions: This sounds obvious, but countless grants go unfunded because simple directions were not followed. If the grant proposal requires no more than a 20-page narrative, double spaced, with 12 point font, **do it**! Reviewers stop reading on page 20 and toss great projects because of font, format, or spacing contrary to the instructions. A funder may think, "if an organization cannot follow simple directions, why should we trust them with our money!" Our experience suggests that the larger the grant and the more money at stake, the more rigidly applied are the directions.

Edit. Edit. Edit: As grant reviewers, we have rejected poorly edited grants. Grant proposals are like an interview, a demonstration of you at your best. If your proposal contains typographical errors, poor grammar, and a sloppy design, funders may think you have low standards and will question your ability to deliver. For large grants it may be a good return-on-investment to pay a professional copy editor or proofreader to review and refine your grant. At the very least, have someone else read and edit your grant before submitting it.