



Six Mistakes Even Experienced Grant Writers Make and How to Avoid Them

- 1) Make Sure You Are Asking for the Right Amount
- 2) Do the Math, Keep Track of Your Success Rate
- 3) Learn the Rules, Then Break Them
- 4) Cultivate Good Relationships and Update Your Grantors, Even When You Aren't Asking for Money
- 5) Participate in a Grants Review Committee & Learn How Proposals Are Scored Firsthand
- 6) If You Get Declined, Find Out Why

A Closer Look at Motivating Grant Makers

1) Make Sure You Are Asking for the Right Amount – When submitting a grant proposal, it is essential to find out what the grant making organization's average gift size is, so that you can be sure your request is on target. You can learn this by looking at their 990's, which are public documents available through places like your local library and county public records office, or online through the Foundation Center database or GuideStar directory. Many foundations and corporate charitable giving arms list the names and award amounts of their grantees on their website, but if you want to dig a little deeper into a particular foundation's giving history, The Foundation Center directory will allow you to pull up the average, largest and smallest gift a foundation has made over the last few years. You may be eligible for a larger grant amount than you think, and many organizations err on the side of asking for too little. Do not get caught in the cycle of asking for \$10,000 every year just because you always have. You may discover that another organization with a similar mission and operating budget has been receiving larger grants each year and you have not because you didn't ask for it.

2) Do the Math, Keep Track of Your Success Rate – If you want to increase your grant dollars, it is very important to know what the overall success rate of your organization is. To do this, you must calculate how many proposals you submitted over the course of one



year, the total dollar amount of all requests submitted, and the number and total dollar amount of grants awarded that year. If you received 30% of the total amount requested, and you need to raise \$100,000 in grant funding this year, you will need to plan to make \$300,000 in grants over the next 12 months. Then you will find that doing step 1, making sure that you are asking for the right amount will help you to plan the total number of proposals and dollar amounts per request to submit to meet your fund-raising goal. This is assuming that you are asking for funding from places that you already know are a good match, are interested in your mission and have either funded you or other nonprofits like yours in the past.

3) Learn the Rules, Then Break Them – You can compare the next point to writing. In order to become a good writer, you first have to learn good grammar and punctuation rules, but once you understand the basics, you can intentionally break the rules to establish your own style. I have seen this rule-breaking trend often over the past few years, as the economy has hit nonprofits particularly hard. I have seen organizations that were facing a deficit budget or were at risk of closing their doors make a special appeal to foundations for the funding they needed to carry through. We have to remember that these grant-making organizations are not banks but are made up of real people who care about your mission, probably for some very personal reasons. If you need emergency funding or have a time sensitive project, go to your grantors outside of their grants cycle, explain your situation and ask for permission to submit a special request. This tactic is not likely to work with government agencies or strict corporate giving arms but may be probable with family foundations where you have built good personal relationships with people that care about your work.

4) Cultivate Good Relationships and Stay in Touch with Grantors, Even When You Aren't Asking for Money – Make a habit of sending a monthly update to your donors so that they stay current on what is happening with your organization. There are several things you can do to keep the communication open, such as sending newspaper clippings, sending out photos of special events, and if your major donors are accessible, set a date to have lunch once a quarter. It is very important to make sure they know when you reach certain milestones and when you are truly struggling. Find out why they are personally interested in your work. You may not always want to grow or operate in exactly the way your donors want you to, but keeping communications open and giving them plenty of opportunities to stay involved and feel good about supporting you will help strengthen your partnerships and make it a lot easier to go to them for increased funding when you need it.



5) Participate in a Grants Review Committee and Learn How Proposals Are Scored First Hand Many places like the United Way, government agencies and local community foundations use volunteer review committees to score proposals and make decisions on how to distribute the funds available to various organizations. A great way to learn about the scoring and distribution process is to volunteer to serve on one of these committees. Some committees divide the proposals into sections, score each part individually, and then fund the ones with the highest overall score. Participating in one of these review committees is a great way to see how the process works firsthand. By doing so, you are being a good citizen and getting involved in important decisions for your community. It is best to avoid any conflict of interest, so if for example you are involved in an arts organization, choose to serve on a committee around education. The process is the same and it will help you to understand how people outside of your world view your work.

6) If You Get Declined, Find Out Why – You may have to ask more than once to get a real answer, but if your proposal is declined, do not accept the standard response form that says thank you for submitting your request but unfortunately, we have limited funding at this time. Make sure that you have a real conversation with the foundation's program officer about why you were turned down, and if there was a review committee, ask to see how the proposal was scored. Read the reviewer's comments and share that information with your colleagues. It is impossible to improve your overall success rate if you do not have a real understanding of why the proposal was declined. Sometimes, the answer truly is that there was not enough funding and the donor is supporting organizations they have a long history with. If you can commit yourself to engaging someone in a real conversation after each decline, you will take great strides to improve your process and your success rate.