Finding the Needle: What Grant Writers Need for More Effective Grant Prospecting

Wednesday, August 21, 2013
Contributed By Heather Stombaugh
Published By CharityChannel

Like many of you, I spend a portion of my time to find the “best fit funders” for the nonprofits I serve. Prospecting is time-consuming, possibly because the quality of the sources at our disposal vary in quality. What’s a harried grant writer to do? Spurred by the experiences of fellow grant writers and my own curiosity, I distributed an electronic survey in spring 2013 about the current utility, frequency of use, and functionality of both free and subscription-based grant prospecting databases. I asked grant writers on LinkedIn groups, Facebook, and Twitter to respond anonymously to questions about:

- The most useful databases, ranked by preference
- How database vendors can better meet customer needs
- Training needs to make grant prospecting more efficient and effective

Who Responded
I used an Amazon.com gift card as an incentive, and I allowed four weeks to collect the surveys. Fifty-eight professional grant writers responded (a convenience sample, “one in which the researcher uses any subjects that are available to participate in the research study”) . They represented grant writing in seventeen states. They included a majority of full-time and freelance grant writers, as well as a smaller proportion of other development professionals and professionals in another field for whom grants is one responsibility. The frequency of their prospecting work varied widely, but more than 70 percent search for grants at least once a week.

- 29 percent on a daily basis
- 44 percent prospect for grants on a weekly basis
- 17 percent on a monthly basis
- 7 percent four to six times a year
- 3 percent two or three times a year

In terms of expertise in searching prospecting databases, they represented a bell curve (“normal distribution”) of levels of experience.
- 5 percent trainer
- 19 percent expert
- 34 percent above average
- 37 percent average
- 5 percent novice

Their responses shed a curious light on grant prospecting today, indicating that there are five ways grant prospecting database developers can better serve their target market.

- Grant writers (and their institutions) will pay more (begrudgingly) for higher-quality sources.
- Developers need to adjust pricing to sell to smaller organizations.
- Developers must continue to improve the user interface of nearly all sources.
- None of the current options available meets the needs of a majority of users and potential users.
- Most grant writers, from novices to experts, need more training on grant prospecting.

What Grant Writers Think about Prospecting Databases

*Database Utility Varies, but Cost is King*

Survey respondents said the top 10 databases are:

- Foundation Directory Online (by a 4:1 margin)
- Grants.gov
- FoundationSearch
- Other
- GrantStation
- Chronicle of Philanthropy
- Christian Funding Directory
- GrantWatch
- The Grantsmanship Center
- Fundsnet Services

While FDO making the top of the list is no surprise, here’s where it gets interesting. While the most popular, the Foundation Directory Online received the most votes for “too expensive.” Note, too, that Grants.gov—a free source—is the second highest ranked database on the list. The *Chronicle of Philanthropy* was noted as not updating its information frequently enough
and containing limited information. Not a single respondent, however, stated they had never used the Foundation Directory Online. Christian Funding Directory and Grants.gov were noted for not updating their information frequently enough.

The fact that “Other” was selected as the fourth highest ranking is telling, as the list of other sources used was long: Grant Gopher, Guidestar, ERI Nonprofit Information, Directory of Texas Foundations and other state foundation directories, Google, eCivis, The Colorado Grants Guide, SMARTS, Seliger, Twitter feeds, NCCS, Hanover Research, local news articles, and various email alerts and newsletters. This list suggests two things: grant writers use multiple sources to find best fit funders, and no single available source is adequate.

The chart below further illustrates the barriers grant writers perceive in using available sources.

Note the number of responses for “never used.” It appears that when someone selects what they like, they stick with it. The next section explores
some of the reasons why some grant writers choose certain sources over others.

**Grant Writers Need Better Options**

Expense was the most frequently noted barrier throughout the survey, but grant writers are concerned about more than cost. Developers of grant prospecting databases should take note: by rank grant writers believe ease of use, search functionality, frequency of updates, and number of indexed key words are critical when selecting a prospecting database. The availability of corporate information and the ability to export data to Excel are important but only after the other elements are covered. Note that users found the Foundation Directory Online, The Grantsmanship Center, *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, and GrantStation difficult to use. As all of these hit the top ten list, we can infer that other factors inform the decision to subscribe. Digging a little deeper, we find experts and novices need different features. Trainers are more concerned with search functionality, while experts are more interested in the user interface. Average and above average users are more concerned about the ability to expert to Excel, while novices are most concerned about the number of indexed key words.

![Bar chart showing the importance of various features for grant writers of different expertise levels.](image)

**Most Grant Writers Want More Training**

In total, 22 percent of grant writers state they need no further training on grant prospecting. The remainder require one hour to more than a full day of
training. Training needs vary considerably by level of expertise, as indicated in the chart below.

The majority of grant writers seek new continuing education opportunities about grant prospecting. They would like to see more workshops on:

- “More scholarly way to search key words tips for when there seems to be a dead end ways to make searches more efficient”
- “Advanced search functions and identifying the most appropriate tools for prospecting”
- “Hands on guidance and practice/exercise”
- “Best way to drill down search results, especially as it varies from site to site depending on how they have the search criteria set-up”
- “Designing effective and efficient searches by setting appropriate search parameters”
- “Maximizing the efficiency of prospecting”
“An introduction to multiple database, not just one or two, with the ability to practice searches and make funding recommendations, and then obtain peer critique”

**Final Thoughts**
I draw much from this simple survey, perhaps most importantly that I am not alone in my frustrations with the available sources. There are too many tradeoffs: price vs. depth of information, niche needs vs. how often the data is updated. Ultimately, the survey confirmed my belief that no single source is good enough. The most effective prospecting relies on using advance search techniques over multiple sources. And like other grant writers, I continue to look for more training opportunities especially at the advanced level. My company recently brought in a medical librarian to share search techniques for several data sources that are immediately transferable to prospecting (advanced Boolean searches, search algorithms, and tools). I think there is room for a great deal of additional study based on the results of this simple survey. What other barriers exist that we haven’t explored? Where is line between quality and price? How do we maximize prospecting efficiency? And where can we find more training opportunities? What grant prospecting challenges do you experience?