Fly with the Fundamentals in this Challenging Economy! Part 1

Wednesday, April 04, 2012

Contributed By Dalya Massachi
Published By Charity Channel

This article is based on Dalya Massachi’s September 2011 keynote speech to the Grant Professionals Association chapter in Miami Valley, OH.

According to Ecclesiastes, “Farmers who wait for perfect weather never plant. If they watch every cloud, they never harvest.”

Good food for thought for us grantwriters.

We all know that lately there has been less grant money out there than in the past. Who remembers those long-lost golden days of 2007 and early 2008? Blame it on the Economic Downturn, the Financial Meltdown, the Great Recession, or whatever you want to call it.

The economic slump has meant that even more organizations are now seeking more grant support. Competition has gotten fiercer. But, when all is said and done, today’s fragile economy does not have to spell trouble for your organization!

The truth is that billions of dollars of grant money continue to, well, maybe not fly, but definitely drift out the doors of foundations—to the tune of over $45 billion in 2010. That’s according to the Foundation Center, which expects foundation giving to show modest growth for 2011.

This is in addition to the fact that twenty-six federal agencies offered 2,963 funding opportunities this March alone. States and cities will also continue to provide grants, even in this economic environment.

The question is this: How can YOU become one of the lucky recipients?

First, no matter what happens in the future, we all have to be prepared for today’s economic volatility to become the new reality or what’s now known as the “new normal” (or even the “new abnormal”). Markets may change for the better, or take a turn for the worse, but the experts agree that we should maintain our focus on the best practices in grant-seeking that have been key to weathering this recession. They will continue to serve us well in the future.
Second, in this crisis there is definitely a whole lot of opportunity. We just have to slightly adjust our course in this time of shifting economic winds. This means that we need to propose projects that:

- Funders will see as worthwhile social investments, no matter what the economy is doing;
- Present us as the uniquely suited problem-solver that the funder is looking for; and,
- Help funders accomplish their own community missions.

Let’s think about it for a moment. Funders are great at providing resources, but they need organizations like ours to turn their dollars into real changes in our communities, especially during this time of economic hardship. We know that they want to make a difference, and they look to us for the tools and know-how that will help them do just that.

Here’s a video version of the above ideas: [http://youtu.be/DGcV7c0n82U](http://youtu.be/DGcV7c0n82U)

**The Five Priorities on the Grantseeker’s Mind**

These are what I call the FIRST priorities. If you’ve been writing grant proposals for a while, you’re probably familiar with these 5 keys to good grantwriting. But funders are telling us that these keys are especially critical in these tight economic times.

Remember that funders are looking for undotted I’s and uncrossed T’s. They’re looking for reasons to whittle down their proposal mountains. Don’t give them reasons to knock you out of the running! You want to answer both the questions they ASK and the questions they DON’T ASK. What I’m saying is that, you have to “read AND write between the lines.”

**F: Facts and Figures**

Here you want to be sure that you explain the context you’re working in and the vital community need you’re addressing. Explain how your issue is especially relevant to your community’s increasing needs right now, in these economic times. Show how you are keeping up with the changing needs in your community, as identified by your clients themselves.

Now…part of your reality may include recent cuts you may have been forced to make in your staff and service delivery. If so, focus on what that has meant for your clients more than what that has meant for your organization itself. Remember: Most funders are interested in your community mission – not your internal issues.

Just a caution here: Remember that the picture you paint of the need or problem should not make the challenge appear hopeless and not worth even trying to address! If you are
dealing with a huge problem, be clear about how your organization is breaking off a piece you can chew that will show the measurable difference you can make.

I: Importance

This is the part where we continually ask ourselves, “So what? Why is this problem so important that we need to address is right now? And, above all, why should the funder care?”

Another way to think about it is this: What would happen if you DIDN’T do your work?

Let’s take a step back to examine the core values and goals of both your organization AND the funder you are approaching. How do you two share the same values and goals?

So often we forget to go back to this starting point. Of course, we already know why we do what we do. We live and breathe it every day and we never need to stop and question it. But the funders don’t necessarily do the same! They often need a little reminder or even a refresher course on the importance of your issue!

How would you complete this sentence: “Our organization focuses on ______ and we value ______. We believe our work is important in the world because ______________________.”

I filled this out for a sample organization in my book, *Writing to Make a Difference: 25 Powerful Techniques to Boost Your Community Impact*. It reads like this: “Our organization focuses on girls’ education around the world, and we value equal opportunity, economic and social development, and self-actualization for all. We believe our work is important because an educated girl is more likely to grow up to create a healthier life for herself, her family, and her community than she otherwise might have. Decades of studies have shown that girls’ education is the key to the development of entire nations.”

This related to that all-important “logic model.” Many funders these days are requiring these charts, which include the assumptions you’re making that lead to your programs. Here we dig deep into our core beliefs about how the world works and what we value, such as equal opportunity, cultural preservation, a clean and well-functioning environment, and so on.

If we can articulate where we’re starting from, we can find common ground with the prospective funder and begin to establish a relationship based on that.

Here’s the thing, funders need current information about what’s really important in the communities they serve. If you can become a trusted source of that information, you can benefit the funder and the field in general. You will also increase the likelihood that your organization will be funded.
**R: Results**

This is really what the funders are looking at! They want to know how you will take their investment and turn it into real outcomes. They want to know what your success will look like.

That means that you have to set up your grant proposal with the grant report in mind. So you need specific, measurable objectives that you will be able to achieve by the grant’s end. You will usually create objectives in one of two forms:

1. In the first form, you anticipate a different behavior or action, in a specific timeframe, up to a specific standard – such as this: “This school year, fifty students will increase their grade point average to a B or higher.”
2. In the second form, you focus on a tangible product, such as a publication or a specific number and quality of individual consultations, or a series of public events.

The idea here is that funders want to know exactly what results you’re aiming for, and then expect you to evaluate your success according to those objectives. We’re talking about evaluation based on quantitative data (numbers you can count) and qualitative data (what benefits your clients perceive).

So yes, count the number of:

- clients you will serve;
- the percent change in attitude or knowledge or behavior you’re striving for;
- your ripple effects throughout your community; and,
- the size of the holes that would be left if your work suddenly stopped.

But you’ll also want to measure how beneficial your work has been in your clients’ eyes. Find out the quality of their experiences with you. What changes did they see happen, and why are those changes so important to them?

While statistical data plays a vital role in your proposals, it needs to always be reinforced by stories. Why? Stories are crucial to human understanding. Stories carry the emotional content behind the informational content of your statistics. In fact, studies have shown that your readers will remember how your piece makes them feel, more than anything else.

You can share a few success stories in a before-and-after format. A couple of classic storylines you might want to use are:

1. The underdog wins.
2. The rewards of hard work.
Now, this might come as a surprise. You don’t actually have to be 100 percent successful in producing your projected results, 100 percent of the time!

Yes, we all want to succeed, but sometimes what we learn from “mistakes” can be even more valuable! Sometimes the results we actually get teach us much more than the results we initially sought.

Funders know that, and they are interested in organizations that are constantly learning. They rely on us to tell them what we have found that works and that doesn’t work. They especially like to fund organizations that are actively addressing their weaknesses and finding new and better pathways to success. They also want to see you share those pathways to success with your colleagues. Funders absolutely LOVE replicable projects!

S: Solution

Here you’re trying to explain the particulars of your proposed program, service, or idea. This should ideally be based on documented best practices. These economic times make it less likely that a funder will want to make a risky investment in something that’s more like an experiment than a tried-and-true project.

In addition to describing “what” you choose to do, you need to explain “why” you think that particular project will solve the problem. Why wouldn’t your community choose an alternative solution? How realistic is your plan, given what you know about your community?

The research process or working theory that led you to design your project needs to appear in the proposal. For example, did you hold a series of meetings with community members, teachers, grassroots leaders, or others to envision and plan the project? Are they helping to drive the program via the board or staff?

Here’s another cautionary note: Make sure that the solution you propose solves more than simply the lack of YOUR solution. For example: If you say the problem is that your neighborhood lacks a health clinic, your solution may be simply to build one. But is that really the problem? Lots of neighborhoods have health clinics and still experience seriously poor health among residents. The problem you’re trying to address is actually poor health. While a new health clinic may be a significant part of the solution to that real problem, it is still only a part.

T: Trust & Track record

Take a moment to think about the major relationships in your life: your romantic partner, your children, your relatives, your close friends. What makes those relationships work? Two of the biggies are: trust and communication.
The same is true in a grantor-grantee relationship. Honest communication leads to trustworthiness, and you’re asking the funder to trust you with their money! You have to show them that their money will be used wisely, by highlighting specifics in your track record. Also, talk about the capable and passionate people who will be in charge of carrying out the work and managing the funds.

Funders expect you to be honest about both your successes and failures. This ties back to what I talked about earlier concerning being honest about your results.

And don’t forget that funders always like to know who else is supporting you. They want to know that your community puts its trust in you – with their money, time, or other resources. They also want to know that your colleagues trust and value your organization’s contribution.

Here’s a video about developing trust with funders: http://youtu.be/cBSHGOa6_Mo

Stay tuned for next week's article - Part 2.