How Grant Seeking Is Like Online Dating

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I met my husband on an online dating site. After I had scoffed for years at the idea of online dating, karma dealt me retribution in the form of his winning profile and wryly intelligent messages. For a long time when people asked how we met, we tried to offer stories involving the supermarket and spilled cans of groceries, or perhaps the library and a mutually loved book. But in the end, we had to admit that what we were first attracted to was a well written paragraph and grainy photo. Something in each other’s profiles gave us a gut feeling, and we went with it.

Grant seeking is much the same if you don’t already have a relationship with the funder. In an ideal world, you would meet the funder in person, talk about what you each want, sparks would fly, and you would begin a relationship that helps fulfill both of your missions.

It’s magic when it happens.

But often it isn’t that easy. The funder doesn’t answer the phone and doesn’t respond to emails. You can’t get a meeting. You don’t get the chance for your meet cute with the funder.

So what are you to do?

If you are convinced that you and the funder are meant to be together, your best bet is to do what online daters do – present yourself as attractively as you can in writing while catering to your audience. Highlight your best qualities. Say what you will bring to the relationship. Be sincere. Send your very best self-portrait out into grant seeking cyberspace and hope for the best.

Here are some strategies from the online dating world that can help your cold proposal give the funder that “gut feeling” about your organization.

Get to the point.

This means don’t ramble. Many online daters begin their “About Me” paragraphs with what their childhood dog’s name was and—45 seconds of scrolling down later—end with what they had for breakfast. (I had an English teacher who called this outpouring of randomness “logorrhea”— a memorable image.) Most readers won’t bother reading that much. So the best online profiles give a brief snapshot of the person, are comprised only of the most relevant information, and are propelled by interesting facts and action verbs.
The same goes for your grant proposal. Remember that your purpose is not to tell the funder everything about your organization, but to tell only what is relevant to the proposed project and to the RFP.

Recently as a grant reviewer, I read a proposal in which the applicant was asked to provide a project timeline. Instead, the applicant spent an entire page talking about the priorities of the organization’s most recent strategic plan, the qualities of the organization’s Executive Director, and the accomplishments of a recent unrelated project. It was a great example of the “what I had for breakfast” approach. And while Virginia Woolf might have made stream of consciousness work, your grant reviewers won’t appreciate it.

**Strike the balance between self-loathing and egotism.**

In my experience, probably two-thirds of online profiles fall into one of two categories in terms of their central message: (1) “Nobody likes me, everyone I’ve dated has broken up with me, and I don’t think online dating will work. Oh well, I’ll give it a try.” or (2) “I am so awesome, I know everything, and you are so lucky to get the chance to date me!” Needless to say, neither of these messages is really appealing.

I have read grant proposals that make the same mistakes. Bemoaning your past misfortunes (“state funding has been cut again and again, the economy has hit us hard, or we are struggling to stay afloat”) can convey pessimism to the funder.

You can (and probably should) use these facts to show why funding is needed, but you need to maintain enthusiasm about the prospect of partnering with the funder to turn the situation around. If you are not excited about the project, why would the funder want to join in? Remember that Eeyore spends a lot of time in the woods by himself.

On the other hand, be careful about over-promising on what you can actually achieve. “Give us $10,000 and we will cure poverty in our city!” reeks of unrealistic confidence. Aim instead for a tone in between these two extremes—paint the picture of yourself as a capable organization eager to establish partnerships to realistically address your community’s need.

**Don’t bad-mouth others.**

Online daters routinely use their forum to criticize the terrible and insensitive man or woman who just broke up with them. These people clearly are looking more for an opportunity to vent than an opportunity to meet someone new.

I have also seen this happen in grant proposals. Bad-mouthing other funders or organizations makes your organization look unprofessional and juvenile. “We are so much better than the other food bank in our town because of XYZ” or “ABC Funder cut off our relationship just when we needed their support the most” are statements that should never appear in your proposal. Just like someone looking online for a date,
funders want to partner with someone who gets along well with others and handles conflict and disappointments maturely.

**Correct grammar makes you look smart.**

Although I cannot imagine a grant writer committing the grammatical atrocities running rampant in online dating (including “UR” instead of “your,” “2nite,” “gtg,” no punctuation, and capitalizing everything—habits that do not make me “lol”), it is worth mentioning that correct grammar makes you look intelligent and capable—while mistakes can make you look lazy or negligent.

I have been in grant review sessions at which other reviewers have said that while a certain proposal is compelling, the grammatical mistakes were so distracting that the reviewer couldn’t focus. Additionally, your sloppy grammar could also lead a reviewer to think you don’t pay attention to details—and therefore might not be capable of administering a grant appropriately.

If grammar is not your strong suit, have a grammar stickler proof it for you. Choose the person who is driven crazy by the “20 items or less” signs at the grocery store and who spends a lot of time in social gatherings explaining the difference between “its” and “it’s.” Believe me, we are so eager to make the world a more grammatically correct place that we will be happy to help you out! This person should also give you feedback on whether your narrative is clear and the project description is easy to understand.

Remember that when the funder does not know you at all, so you need to use all the resources at your disposal to appear competent and intelligent. I often joke to my husband that a correctly used semicolon made our relationship possible. It could be the same for you when so much is riding on a first impression.

Creating a relationship out of thin air can be difficult, whether you are looking for a date or a grant. But making your first impression by means of a written statement gives you the benefit of being able to carefully think through and craft your message. Using these tips from the online dating scene can help you convey what a great partner you will be.