Prospective ABCs?

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This past June, I had the occasion to represent my local GPA chapter, Southeast Texas (SETC), at a sister organization’s Houston meeting: the Association of Fundraising Professionals (AFP). I would not exactly classify myself as a fundraiser. However, I often reason that work elements of grant professionals and fundraisers would naturally intersect. We’re all tasked with finding means of getting funding for essential needs or project(s) that organizations and their scholars and researchers wish to conduct.

In my endeavor to “ascend” (see: http://zacks2014.wordpress.com/about/), I felt it worthwhile to learn more about successful grantsmanship by seeing what local giving representatives of three major funders – namely the Episcopal Health Foundation, Shell Oil Company, and Kroger Co. – had to say about effective strategies to get funding.

So I put on my little black suit and headed up Houston’s 610 loop to The Junior League of Houston, Inc. for AFP’s Annual Funders Panel Luncheon.

The ABCs

Despite the realization that fundraisers speak a different language from grant professionals such as myself, one of the panelists made a point that struck me as critical to almost any grant or fundraising professional:

“How do your homework.”

Now I don’t know about you, but it has been a long time since I’ve done homework. This disdainful word springs forth the image of passively standing in front of a teacher who is giving me an assignment to complete according to his/her specifications. What sets the task of a grant professional above the level of homework is that we must set our own standards of distinction. We must do more than homework.

In parallel with the GrantAscent tenets I’d set for myself, understanding the funder’s perspective requires:

- Information – in this case: funder’s instructions.
- Opportunity – in this case: funder’s current priorities.
- Change – in this case: fit to the funder’s guidelines.

Let’s pick up a magnifying glass and take a closer look.
The funder panelists were all emphatic on the “homework” point. What they effectively meant was: “DO PROSPECT RESEARCH!” This was a term I encountered for the first time when I joined GPA. It refers generally to the process of searching for grant opportunities – that is, “prospects.” More specifically, grant professionals search a database or listing of funding agencies (nonprofit organizations and corporations, for example). The Foundation Directory, GrantStation, and The Grantsmanship Center provide a few options.

Interestingly, many of us scientific grant writers – and the scientists we advise – toil away without utilizing any consolidated database. The most frequent search strategy is to punch key search terms for a project into the internet. One reason that researchers make use of such an inefficient approach is the lack of knowledge about the available software. Scientists write grants, to be sure. But they are not trained as grant professionals. Another reason is lack of access. In their respective organizations, scientists are, more often than not, outside of the circle of fundraising/development teams that use these tailored search tools. Finally, some organizations are relatively small and do not invest in the more appropriate resources such as ProQuest Pivot™, a tool that capture international, federal, state, and foundation grant opportunities.

Ask a scientist – and maybe even a scientific grant writer – and you are likely to find that many of them haven’t even heard of those options for efficient searching. Yet this is not the only tool-gap issue.

Access to central repositories for all-things-grants in the sciences/research is still limited, despite some relatively recent, potentially more affordable tools for academic researchers on the horizon, such as GrantSelect. Regardless of the tools at hand, I consistently discourage scientists from relying on second-hand sources – listservs, blog sites, and even an agency’s summary list. They often contain out-of-date or inaccurate information. Instead, I spend a lot of energy teaching scientists to locate the SOURCE document – the Request for Proposal (RFP) or other agency’s namesake – and how to decode one. A predominant example of a SOURCE listing is the NIH Guide for Grants and Contracts (GC Guide).

Although you may find extensive lists of opportunities on a particular NIH Institute or Center (IC) web page, site updates are variable. Unless you go to the actual RFP – and subscribe to updates, you could be holding meetings about a grant that is no longer offered.

From the RFP, you must determine if it meets the funding needs and capabilities of the organization/investigator/project. This information, minimally, is necessary to assess the fit.

Some critical categories of information include:

- **RFP Scope**: Grant Type¹, IC Participation, Topic, Budget, Years
- **RFP Eligibility**: Institution, Applicant (e.g., Principal Investigator)
- **RFP Requirements**: Deadline, Forms, Submission Process (e.g., grants.gov)

¹ e.g., for NIH, the “Activity Code”
Inside Scoop

Members of the AFP Funders Panel also had opinions, at both extremes, about whether they would encourage applicants to contact them or another agency representatives by phone.

In the scientific realm, this usually means the Program Contact (PC) listed in the RFP. This is what NIH has to say: [http://nexus.od.nih.gov/all/2011/06/29/should-i-contact-a-program-officer-before-i-apply/](http://nexus.od.nih.gov/all/2011/06/29/should-i-contact-a-program-officer-before-i-apply/).

Truly, the NIH equivalent of the fundraising “cold call” doesn’t often yield much information. Pursuing another level of “prospect research” is worthwhile. Once you’ve thoroughly identified the critical features of the RFP, an entry to a conversation with the PC is to note down any ambiguities or missing information pertaining to the decision of whether or not to apply. When considering options for projects and their focus, it is useful to send the project idea(s) in short summary form, along with your questions, to the PC – especially to one in the IC of interest. The next step is to request a telephone appointment.

There’s a lot of information you can and should get before taking a stab at the PC.

**RFP History**

An important touch in the art of prospect research is to prioritize (not just find) opportunities. To make strategic decisions about putting resources into working on a grant, it’s productive to dig deep into the data on trends. This process is vastly improved by NIH RePORTER (or can apply to other data/databases provided by the funding organization), and even more exciting, the Federal RePORTER that became available on September 22 to cover more agencies (i.e., NIH, NSF, NASA, EPA, DOD, AHRQ, FDA, CDC, VA).

As for the ABCs, you can find another layer of information that will reveal the trends beneath the stated guidelines. Some examples:

- **Grant Type:** Total number of awards (on active and expired “prior” RFP), awards by IC
- **RFP Scope:** Specific projects awarded, range and average budget awarded
- **RFP Eligibility:** Awards to the given type of institution (e.g., nonprofit vs. academic)

**News Pulse**

While on your prospect research path, you’ll come across copious materials. If not, think harder. Press releases on awardees, at one extreme, can be used to understand the IC’s interests – and even to identify potential contacts within the organization. At the other extreme, when reading news or peer-reviewed articles by experts in the field, review the acknowledgement section; it includes the list of grants that funded the research. The same can be gleaned from scientific presentations. You never know; peers may be willing to share information on what they know about trends or their experience with an agency. Or you can just get a flavor for feasibility of funding opportunities. And pick up the scent of a few new tracks to follow.

I say: “Do more than just your homework.” Get your ABCs, for sure. Go ahead and prospectively Source, Decode, and Upcycle your efforts too.

It might save you time at the stage “GO.”