Celebrating Grant Professionals

By Charlisa Garg, GPC

Throughout my two-plus decades of nonprofit work experience, I have noticed that grants work often seems to be the "red-headed stepchild" of the development community, lacking the clout and sometimes the respect afforded to efforts concentrated on individual giving, major donor relations, and even special event fundraising.

Now, we all know that grant funding should never be the primary revenue stream of any healthy nonprofit. But does that mean that the work, professional development, and recognition for those responsible for grant work is any less important in supporting an organization's mission? The answer to that, obviously, is a resounding "NO!"

With that in mind, and in order to further advance grantsmanship as a profession, GPA is now taking the lead to establish the first annual International Grant Professionals Week to recognize and celebrate the work of all grant professionals, administrators, consultants, managers, grant-makers, and writers.

The impact of grant professionals is mighty.

- In 2013, over 1 million public charities were registered with the IRS, an increase of nearly 30% over ten years. The vast majority of these nonprofits are competing for public and private funding, including grants, to help them meet their missions.

- "Key Facts on U.S. Foundations" by the Foundation Center states that $54.7 billion was granted to nonprofits by over 86,000 private, corporate, and community foundations in 2013. This is an increase of more than 80% over the past decade.

The vast majority of these awards are the result of well planned, well written, and well packaged grant proposals. Ones that match the mission of the organization to the focus of the funder. Ones that portray a compelling needs statement, demonstrate the expertise of the nonprofit in meeting those needs, and include a strong evaluation plan. Renewed awards incorporate meticulous grants administration and management plans and strong reporting mechanisms.

Grant writing is a skilled craft. One that anyone can learn, but one that requires much more than just being able to write well. Strong grant writers, no matter their job title or position, have developed and continually polish a set of skills that help them position their organization for success.
Preparing grants takes time and expertise. Often grant guidelines can be confusing and complex; applying for a grant requires a serious time commitment to fully understand the requirements, as well as the organization's ability to carry out the grant-funded activities. Government grants are especially time-consuming, and a small oversight in the proposal can result in an application being disqualified from consideration. Often, the time spent researching and pulling together the information for the grant takes up more time than the actual writing of the proposal.

Most grants are very competitive. Having experienced grant professionals who can identify the most appropriate opportunities and oversee the creation of strong proposals will increase an organization's chances of successfully being awarded a grant. Even so, many well-designed proposals are still not funded, and requests that are successful one year may be rejected the next. This is where relationship-building with funders can make a big difference.

Everyone likes to be appreciated!

With funders becoming more sophisticated in their giving, grant professionals deserve to be recognized and treated as specialized and skilled development professionals. The nonprofit community needs to understand the important role that educated and ethical grant professionals play in the overall health of their organizations.

What is interesting is "how" we like to be appreciated. Heavens knows, we did not choose our careers for the monstrous paychecks! GPA conducted a survey of members in late 2014 which reported the following:

- When asked what would make them personally feel recognized and appreciated as grant professionals, over half of the respondents chose being able to attend a professional training of their choice (because of course, we want to get even BETTER at doing our jobs!)
- This was closely followed by being mentioned in a newsletter/on organizational website, and receiving a letter of commendation from their employer
- A note of thanks or public praise was chosen by a little over one-third of respondents

Save the Date: International Grant Professionals Week (March 16-20)

Look for more information in the coming weeks about International Grant Professionals Week (March 16-20) and how you can participate in this new movement to recognize and celebrate the important contributions that you, as a grant professional, make to support your organizations and improve your communities.