Tips for Success in the Evolving Field of Grant Development
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The first grant I wrote, back in 1995, was awarded — $25,000 for an HIV/AIDS-prevention program. Talk about reinforcement! Twenty years later, I still love grant writing; but now I spend most of my time reviewing grant proposals — for government agencies and for the Miller-Dwan Foundation where I am a Grants Specialist. As both a grant writer and a grant maker, I’ve had the chance to view the evolving field of grant development from a unique perspective. This article reviews grant writing from the perspective of a grant maker and provides tips to help ensure that your proposal is successful.

Be a Good Storyteller
As has always been the case when writing a proposal, you have one mission: to convince the reader to provide funding. Today, however, the best proposals present not just a program description, but tell a compelling story—they use plain language to paint a real-life picture about how the organization’s work impacts its constituents. Bear in mind that the reader doesn’t have the same depth of understanding of your organization as you do. So, you must step back far enough to create the context, and then tell your story without a hiccup, pause or contradiction.

Public and private foundations tend to allow some leeway for creativity. In contrast, federal research proposals leave far fewer opportunities to be creative. Grant writers still must convince the federal grant reviewer of the value of the project, but the task must be accomplished within much more stringent guidelines. However, federal grant reviewers read so much dry information, that it can be useful to incorporate even a brief story about how a project or program will truly impact someone’s life. Depending on the governmental agency, this may help your proposal stand out.

Cautionary Tales: There Are Limits to Creativity
Even with greater opportunities to be creative, guidelines must be followed. I am aware, in fact, of an excellent medical proposal that was unceremoniously tossed because research tables were inserted in 10 point font versus the required 12 point font. Why so fussy? Because, there are typically strict limits on proposal length. Every applicant deserves the same amount of space to make their case. In essence, the saying “rules are meant to be broken” does not apply to funder guidelines. Otherwise, the integrity of the process is undermined.

In another instance, a grant award was reduced because a program budget that included an in-kind budget line item was labeled, not with the required dollar amount, but with the word “priceless.” This told the funder that the grant writer did not want to put in the effort to determine the in-kind value. Even if you are strapped for time, you still need follow the basic rules of professionalism.

Ignore A Funder’s Culture At Your Own Risk
In sum, in our effort to accomplish more in less time these days, I’m noticing that the high level professionalism required by the grants profession is increasingly breached. While more creativity is allowed, and writing style is becoming increasingly friendly and informal, guidelines and other general etiquette rules must be followed.

In particular, be sensitive to the culture of each funder. Learn as much about them as you can. You can accomplish this by conducting a thorough website review, looking at previous grants they’ve funded, and reading their guidelines on how to communicate with them. Do not skip this step! You’ll find that some foundations welcome phone calls; others do not. Some will give feedback; others are all-volunteer and just don’t have the time.

As grant professionals, we have to live with this. Being pushy does not help. And, contacting foundation board members in an effort to push an agenda is a no-no. As fair as a program officer wants to be, they are human, and whether they are aware of it or not, they can be left with a bad taste in their mouths when their rules are not followed.

**Remember: It’s Not About You**
As Debbie Perrone, Senior Director of Corporate & Foundation Relations at Johns Hopkins University, states in her *Top 10 Tips for Seeking Foundation Support:* “It’s not about you.” She advises:

> “Foundations exist to give money away, but they have their own interests — sometimes based on the wishes of the original benefactor and sometimes based on the philanthropic priority of the current board and staff leadership…You will rarely succeed in convincing a foundation to fund something that isn’t on their agenda.”

**The Relationship Doesn’t End With the Grant**
If you are lucky enough to be funded, keep in mind that the grantor/grantee relationship is quid pro quo. Your proposal becomes your contract with the funder, and typically you must submit reports that require the same care as proposal preparation. While in the past, you may have received a friendly reminder, today, foundation staff may simply not have the time. Meeting grant report deadlines is critical and may, or probably will, mean the difference between being funded in the future or, depending on the foundation, being ignored.