

Contributions

The "How-to" Source for Nonprofit Professionals



Grant Smarts

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If you're like many people in the nonprofit sector, you're probably more comfortable with metaphors of peace than combat. But if you want to succeed in the highly competitive arena of grantseeking, you'll benefit from becoming what I like to call a "Guerrilla Grantsman."

Although your goal is not to sway your grantmaker, nor to maim those with whom you are competing, the reality of seeking grants is that to be successful you really do need to fight to gain a grantmaker's attention. And, you need to assert the merit of your case, more or less aggressively, depending on the fierceness of the competition.

In short, you will be well served by adopting a mindset of a fighter, prepared to do whatever it takes to win an award.

I have described "Guerrilla Grantsmanship" in detail elsewhere, but here we'll briefly review the key challenges facing the "Guerrilla Grantsman," and look at strategies for winning.

Although the grantmaking process was never intended to be competitive, it has naturally evolved in that direction. The numbers alone tell the story. The nonprofit sector is comprised of over one million organizations in the U.S., with total annual budgets of approximately \$568.4 billion.

Of this group, approximately 625,000 organizations are tax exempt according to the provisions of the 501 (c) (3) designation of the Internal Revenue Code.

Now contrast the enormity of the nonprofit sector with the number of private grantmaking organizations (about 40,000), most of which are small, understaffed and give away less than \$50,000 per year. Any way you look at it, there's a severe imbalance between demand and supply.

Presuming you're a professional person who doesn't generally socialize with the rich and powerful, the first area of challenge is to gain access to what may be a "foreign territory" for you.

You need to figure out how to "invade" the territory inhabited by

foundation trustees, or those who represent them. Related to this challenge of access is capturing the attention of people deluged with requests. The answer to both lies in identifying or recruiting someone known to the grantmaker or her representatives to introduce you.

In some cases, you might be looking for an "ambassador," that is, a member or former member of the nonprofit community who has developed a relationship with the grantmaker and now can provide access. In other cases, you may be able to identify a "friendly native," that is, a member of the grantmaking community with an interest in your organization or cause, who might be able to approach the grantmaker on a peer level. In either case, you'll be wise to recruit a liaison person to introduce you to the grantmaker and ensure that she is receptive to your approach.

If you suspect you don't know a potential liaison either directly or indirectly, you may not have posed the question properly, to the right people, or to enough people. Assuming you have a board of trustees, a volunteer group, or a loyal constituency of students, patients, or patrons, there probably is someone who knows the grantmaker among the people you know. Keep asking until you find a connection.

Conducting a dialogue in which all of the power resides on the side of the grantmaker constitutes the second area of challenge. In regard to this hurdle, you will have to adopt a "Customer-Is-Always-Right" attitude, accepting the reality that the grantmaker will set the tone and topic for the discussions, as well as the place and time.

This "service mentality" should include your willingness to "go the extra mile," to do whatever it takes to respond to the grantmaker's requests. Have you ever noticed that while other stores may come and go, Nordstrom's and Sharper Image — despite their relatively high prices — continue to thrive year after year?

Perhaps you're thinking that the imbalance of power is distasteful, if

not intolerable, psychologically. To help compensate for some of the resentment you may feel, you can recoup some measure of your dignity and autonomy through another strategy which derives from our military metaphor.

You may feel (and fare) better if you limit communication with your grantmaker to what can be shared on a "Need-to-Know" basis. Tell the grantmaker only what is germane and what will enhance your standing in her eyes. While you should never lie — for practical as well as ethical reasons — neither do you need to volunteer any information about warts, shortcomings, or other problems your organization or project may have.

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Your communication should be guided by your pursuit of a delicate balance between two disparate qualities. On the one hand, you should appear needy enough to merit philanthropic support, and on the other hand, you must appear professional enough to instill a sense of confidence that you will deliver a project of high quality.

One way to achieve this balance is to use another "guerrilla" concept, that of camouflage. For your publications, proposal format, or presentation materials, always make choices that are tasteful and professional, without being "glitzy" or ostentatious.

For instance, for your printed materials, choose one- or two-color printing over four-color. For your presentation slides, create them in your own office, with an inexpensive software program, rather than having them commercially prepared by a PR firm. For your proposals, go with simple, stapled or paper-clipped copies, eschewing elaborate binders and expensive color copies. Keep in mind that many grantmakers

disassemble the proposal as you submit it, and circulate different sections to different readers. Make it easy to take apart.

As for that all-important *strategic position* that will set you apart, and above, those with whom you are competing, here the answer requires thorough homework and subtle communication. You need to learn as much as you can about the grantmaker's agenda, what the foundation or agency's priorities and values are, and what the individual program officer's or representatives goals are. Then you need to translate what you're planning to do into terms which will appear to advance those goals and objectives.

In short, your task is to interpret your program in such a way that it becomes clear you are advancing the grantmaker's agenda, and will make the grantmaker look good. Writing a proposal document which is elegant, even cogent, is easy; communicating the message that your project will help the grantmaker achieve her goals is harder, but must be done if you are to succeed.

And the sweet accomplishment of success makes all this effort worthwhile. Just as the victors of a military coup gain respectability once they seize power, so, too, does your position and status change once some of the grantmaker's power (and money) has wended its way to your organization as a reward for distinguishing yourself from the "thundering hordes" of grantseekers, and having "won the battle."

Once you've joined the elite ranks of grantees, the power balance shifts ever so slightly, so you then can respectfully adopt a posture which is more collaborative and collegial. Even when you return to the fray, entering subsequent rounds of competition, your odds are improved over the first time award seeker, since the aura of being a "former grantee" continues to distinguish you from your competitors.

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