

## Excedrin® for Grantseeking Headaches

We all know bad things happen to good people. Sometimes when bad things happen, there is little to do. Other times, there are treatments or ways to fix the problem. Despite your best efforts to the contrary, bad things happen to good grantseekers. From the first, most exploratory conversation to the submission of a revised proposal, the situation can go south. Here are some suggestions for what you can do when you find yourself in one of these unpleasant situations.

The first time is during the preliminary phase. You've done your research and ascertained that the foundation is an appropriate prospect, and you call to schedule a meeting to discuss an idea you have for a request. During this call, the foundation representative is unenthusiastic, or even downright discouraging. At this point, you need to determine the cause of his lack of enthusiasm. The possibilities are myriad, but the most frequent ones are: 1) this specific project does not seem like a fit; 2) your organization doesn't fit with the foundation's priorities at this time; or 3) the foundation is out of money, whether temporarily or permanently. If it's a matter of the specific project being the problem, just thank the program officer or trustee for his time and attention, and ask if you might approach him in the future with a different project. If it's your organization which is the problem, be sure you gain clarification about how this mistake occurred: perhaps the foundation has recently changed its grantmaking focus; perhaps the bad publicity about an unfortunate event associated with your organization is sullyng your reputation; perhaps your CEO made a *faux pas* during the last meeting. Whatever the reason, the only thing worse than knowing is not knowing, so you need to remain calm and polite enough to ferret out this answer, before you thank the person courteously, and indicate that you will not contact him again unless or until the situation has changed or been rectified.

Sometimes, however, the preliminary conversation goes smoothly, and the grantmaker invites you in to discuss the project. But the meeting doesn't go well. Perhaps the grantmaker misunderstood the idea you were pitching. Perhaps you were merely invited in as a courtesy. This happens most often with organizations – frequently those which are large or prestigious or both – with whom the grantmaker feels obliged to take the time to meet. Perhaps something critical has changed in the grantmaking environment between the time you called and the meeting took place. For instance, when catastrophe hits – whether it be a natural disaster or a terrorist attack – funders often respond to the emergency, thus depleting funds which might ordinarily be spent otherwise. As with the unenthusiastic response to the exploratory phone conversation, it is absolutely essential to remain calm and polite, so you can find out the specific reason that the response has gone from green to red. Once you have prevailed on the grantmaker to share the reason with you, you can take the most appropriate next step, whether it be to gracefully withdraw, ask for consideration at the next opportunity, or embark on a different project.

Of course, the further one proceeds, the more distressing it is when things go south. So if you have had your preliminary meeting, and the grantmaker invited you to submit a proposal, and you crafted a compelling, cogent request, you might be inclined to begin thinking you're pretty much "home free" when you are invited to discuss the request in

detail, and you go in to meet after the grantmaker has had an opportunity to review the proposal.

If this turns out to be a difficult meeting, you're certain to be dismayed, and apt to feel betrayed or angry. The grantmaker may pose questions to which you have no good answers. He may express skepticism about the validity of your approach. He might raise objections to the core ideas on which your project is based. But you can neither give in to your emotions, nor should you just throw up your hands and abandon hope. Rather than accepting defeat and slinking away to in despair, or worse yet, saying something you might ultimately regret, just gather as much information as you can, take three deep breaths, and tell the grantmaker you will get back to him shortly.

Upon leaving his office, repair to the nearest coffee shop, or better yet, bar. As you stare into your beverage, you are probably wondering, "What now?" Here are some ideas for how to proceed.

The very first thing to do – regardless of the direction you determine is best to save this project -- is to call the program officer or trustee as soon as possible and withdraw your present request. Withdrawal has several advantages. First, it engenders gratitude on the part of the program officer, because it spares him the difficult task of declining a request which has gone further than it should without being in line for an award. Second, it saves face for you, preventing the indignity of a decline. Third, while withdrawing a request eliminates the possibility of being awarded a token grant, it is worth foregoing a small grant today to keep the possibility open to receive a larger grant in the next cycle.

The specific approach that you choose following your withdrawal depends on which of several possible scenarios has occurred. To determine this, you need to reflect on the conversation with the program officer, mining your memory for what was implied as well as what was said explicitly.

One possible scenario is the "beaten to the well" story. If the program officer referred – even obliquely – to one of your competitors, it is usually the case that this competitor – or a perceived competitor -- submitted a request to the same funder between your first meeting and before your second, and that the competitor's request was more attractive than yours, thus eliminating funding that might otherwise have gone to your organization. This happens fairly often, and may happen more frequently as foundation funds suffer from the challenging economic climate. It is a complex situation. Clearly, in the short term, the other organization has "eaten your lunch." You need to wait until the next funding cycle when more funds become available, and this could range anywhere from a month to a year, depending on the funder. But beyond the obvious delay, there are other issues you should consider exploring.

First, if you and the other organization are direct competitors, you will probably find yourselves bumping into each other with increasing frequency as the funding environment becomes more competitive. The best strategy in this case is to meet with the leadership of the competing organization, and work out some way to coordinate your

approaches. If coordination isn't possible or practical, the next issue to explore is collaboration. Even if you find it difficult to consider collaboration, you should consider it, since the grantmaker will be thinking about it for sure. Finally, if collaboration is neither possible nor practical, the ultimate question to consider is whether both organizations are really necessary, or whether some kind of affiliation or merger might not accomplish the purposes more effectively and more efficiently. Foundations generally look favorably on mergers, believing that they achieve significant cost savings for the community. And foundation funding to support merger-related costs is generally easy to secure. Eventually, an organization which grows from acquiring or merging with a competitor becomes stronger and achieves some efficiencies of scale.

The second scenario which might have occurred comes in to play when the individual assigned your request changes between the first and second meetings. While the causes for this are varied, despite the best efforts to provide background, people have varying levels of experience and expertise, and no two people view a project the same way. Almost any difference in knowledge or perspective can result in the request for your project going astray. The second reviewer's negative comments and impossible questions often stem from ignorance, or inaccurate perspective. If this is the case, your job is to spend some time educating the representative, and providing the history or background which will enable him to view your request more favorably. If you are dealing with a new representative who *thinks* he "knows it all" – an occupational hazard of sophisticated program officers -- you need to articulate clearly the assets and community benefits which distinguish you from your competitors, and outline the singular contributions your organization makes to the community. The acid test for this issue can be conducted as follows. If your organization disappeared overnight, in the months that follow, would the organization be re-established to meet the needs it is currently serving? If the answer is "yes," you are on stable ground, seeking support for a service vital to the well-being of the community.

The third scenario is that the funder has changed direction during the interlude between your first and second meetings. This is the toughest obstacle to overcome, since the funder has all the power in this imbalanced relationship. After you withdraw your request gracefully, try to learn about the new direction, and think creatively if any of your organization's other activities might qualify for support.

Of course, the most disappointing time to become aware of failure is to receive a formal letter of decline in response to your submission. This should never happen to the savvy grantseeker, because a letter which includes *nothing* but the funder's best wishes should never come as a surprise. There should be at least one meeting, and probably multiple conversations between grantmaker and grantseeker between the submission of the request and the formal response. If there is no communication, that fact, in and of itself, should presage bad news. If you're in the uncomfortable position of receiving no preliminary feedback, it is always preferable to try to persuade the grantmaker to provide some, so you can withdraw the request rather than receive a formal refusal. As outlined above, withdrawals are much more conducive to maintaining a positive relationship than



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declines, and a request submitted and withdrawn can well be prelude to a positive response the next time.

In the current challenging economic environment, even the best grantseekers are having a tough time. This year, in addition to a large bottle of Excedrin<sup>®</sup>, perhaps a healthy dose of patience and prayer would be in order, as well, as we all watch and work to turn things around.