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## Grant Smarts

### Grantwriters and Other Kinds of Help

By Susan L. Golden

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Many nonprofit executives think about creating a position or hiring someone as a "grantwriter." They believe the person in such a position needs only to be a good writer. I suppose they have an image of an English major sitting in a cubicle, turning out elegant documents which, once submitted, result in a regular flow of grant awards.

And it might actually work... if your organization is one of top one or two percent in terms of infrastructure for grantseeking.

Just what characterizes highly effective grantseeking organizations are six requirements:

- First, your organization has a team of people who work consistently at building and maintaining relationships with funders.
- Second, your organization has staff members who are accustomed to planning projects or initiatives comprehensively and in a timely manner.
- Third, the services your organization provides are consistent with the values of the funders with whom you have solid relationships.
- Fourth, the project for which your organization is seeking support is consistent with the specific funder's highest current priorities.
- Fifth, your organization has experience conducting advocacy activities with decision-makers, or those who influence decision-makers.

• Sixth and most important, you have a CEO who is a charismatic salesperson and is willing to spend 25 to 40 percent of his or her time raising money.

If any one of these six critical elements is missing, the person in the position of grantwriter is doomed to failure, no matter how luminous the prose she produces.

As I have explained elsewhere at length, only three to four percent of all proposals submitted to funders win awards. And to be sure, there are elegant documents among the 96-97 percent which receive letters declining support, those dreadful letters that end, "We send you nothing but our best wishes," with the emphasis on "nothing."

So before you put an ad in the *Chronicle of Philanthropy* for a "grantwriter," take the pulse of your organization, and see if all six critical requirements are present. If not, you need more than a grantwriter. What you need to improve your competitive position in grantseeking is grantseeking counsel. You need help that can tackle complex challenges that go far beyond mere writing. Here are the ways in which effective grantseeking counsel can help.

#### 1) Research That Sells

Most nonprofit staff members are not professional

researchers, and even when researchers are available, most are not salespeople. Grantseeking experts know how to identify information which makes a cogent case for a project, or which justifies the selection of a given approach.

A grantseeking expert will identify sources which are known to staff members within the funding organization you wish to approach, or, better yet, have been supported by this funder.

Concepts and approaches are like fashion. You wouldn't want to appear at a black tie event in jeans; you wouldn't want to appear at a picnic in a tux. Your rationale must be under-girded by ideas which are familiar to the funder and consistent with their thinking.

#### 2) Strategic Project Planning

When given an opportunity to dream about what could be done with more money, most staff members can usually describe what they would do. The problem is that they may know little about what specific funders want, and they often care less. Good grantseeking counsel can teach (or beg, or plead, or cajole) your staff into integrating a funder's priorities into their planning.

Most grantseekers ignore the reality that funders even have goals. But that miniscule percentage who are success-

ful embrace the grantmaker's goals, making them their own.

A grantseeking expert can look objectively at your goals and those of the funder, and help bridge gaps between them. If the goals are diametrically opposed, and no creative approach will enable you to reflect the grantmaker's goals in your work, then the honest grantseeking expert will suggest you look elsewhere for funding, and will be able to help you identify a better match.

#### 3) Team Building

All grant-funded projects require more than one person for implementation. Therefore, all or at least most of the people who will be involved in implementation should participate to some degree in the planning of the project, since no one likes to have the plans of others thrust upon him.

There should be an internal team if the application is being submitted by one organization, and a collaborative team - or a team of teams - if the project is being submitted on behalf of a number of organizations.

A grantseeking expert can help you select your team members, help to develop assignments which are appropriate, and then assist you in following up to make sure tasks are performed well and in a timely fashion.

*Continued overleaf*

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In the preparation of an application, intense work is often required to be conducted under considerable pressure caused by a tight deadline. Personality issues and relationship issues often are at work. With good support, you can ensure that everyone is still on speaking terms with everyone else on the team should the project get funded.

## 4) Advocacy

The importance of advocacy and the subtleties of this form of persuasion often elude non-profit executives. When you're submitting a proposal for a competitive opportunity, many of those you're up against will work with lobbying firms or have experience conducting their own advocacy activities. If you're not prepared (or financially able) to hire a firm whose

address is K Street in DC, you can still advocate effectively.

A grantseeking expert can help you develop appropriate, persuasive materials. Whether it involves recruiting a coalition of politicians who care about your issue or your constituency, securing signatures on a petition, or getting effective letters of support, a grantseeking expert will know how best to structure your advocacy efforts.

## 5) Matching Funds

Funders rarely like to be sole sources. If your project requires support from more than one source, then the project needs to appeal to the values of more than the first (or primary) funder.

To shape a project with multiple appeals is complex, and even if staff members

understand and can do everything else we've mentioned, it is perhaps the most significant challenge of all to ensure that your project is shaped in such a way that it will appeal to different sources.

Often federal agencies require that they provide no more than a certain percentage of the total cost of the project, and that the balance be raised from other, usually local, sources. A grantseeking expert can help you figure out how to navigate these tricky waters.

## 6) Creating a "Grantseeking Machine"

Some large organizations such as universities or academic medical centers are willing to make the investment required in staffing a "Foundation Relations" or "Government Relations" office.

In relatively small organizations, this "office" might consist of one professional staff person supported by one clerical staff member. In larger organizations, the staff size might be commensurately larger.

The challenge, here – and grantseeking counsel can help – is to find staff who are sufficiently agile to work in many disciplines, and are sufficiently personable to work with project directors or principal investigators of many stripes.

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Whether you hire a grantseeking consultant for an occasional project, or are gearing up to raise millions through federal grants, recognize that good writing is necessary, but hardly sufficient, for effective grantseeking efforts.