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Grant Smarts

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Some myths are entertaining and harmless, others can be detrimental, especially if they lead you to rely on wishful thinking rather than hard work.

Myths about grantseeking abound, and those who accept them receive rejection letters far more often than grant awards.

Researchers report that only two to five percent of all proposals submitted to grantmakers get funded. However, once we dispel some of the potentially harmful myths, you can enjoy much better odds, joining that savvy minority of grantseekers who enjoy consistent and satisfying success.

The Tooth Fairy Myth

Put your proposal in the mail and a check will arrive in the return mail.

People with little experience in fund raising often observe other organizations winning grants and infer that the process depends on the magical transformation of a proposal into a check.

While proposal submission is an integral part of the grantseeking process, a proposal is no more or less important to winning a grant than a tooth is to the Tooth Fairy transaction. Let's look at the two transformational processes more carefully, and note the important similarities.

A child with her first loose tooth is very curious, if not fearful, of the phenomenon. She queries her friends, her siblings, or her parents and quickly learns that loose teeth are part of the normal development process. Daily, as she wiggles her tooth, her parents tell her to "leave it alone," or offer to end the ambiguity by tying one end of a string to the tooth and the other to the kitchen door. When the tooth finally comes out, parents will often provide the handkerchief or "tooth pillow" into which the tooth should be placed for optimum results.

Similarly, in the process of seeking a grant, the grant-seeker needs to do

basic querying first, determining which funders are interested in their area and learning how they like to be approached. Successful grantseekers hold several conversations with their funder, who often suggests approaches or solutions to problems. Lastly, funders often help with the preparation of the actual proposal, recommending strategies or emphases which will make it more attractive to decision-makers.

The Santa Claus Myth

The most promising funders are fat and famous, live far away, can read your mind, and make brief visits only to drop off gifts.

Clearly, both transformations — a tooth into a dollar, a proposal into a grant — depend on solid research, conversation, negotiation, and the kind of ongoing dialogue that characterizes good relationships.

When people new to fund raising begin thinking of prospective funders, their initial thoughts turn to big foundations located in distant places. While Ford and Kellogg do have lots of money and make hundreds of large grants each year, these grants are almost invariably awarded to organizations with whom program officers have been in dialogue for months, if not years.

If you concentrate on cultivating funders in your own immediate geographic area, rather than looking to funders in distant places, you'll be more likely to succeed.

Grantseeking is like real estate, insofar as the three most important criteria for foundation decisions are usually "location, location, and location." In fact, when you venture far afield in your grantseeking, the first question you're likely to be asked by a program officer in Manhattan is whether you have the support of the folks back home.

Strong local support is part of the best argument to convince people elsewhere that what you're doing has merit. You'll make the most productive use of your time if you invest your energy in identifying who among your board or staff

knows whom among the foundation decision-makers and then plan appropriate lobbying efforts.

One of the most insidious parts of the Santa Claus myth is the belief that somewhere there is someone who can read your mind. Not so.

Just as we tell children to write Santa a letter detailing their "wish list," effective grantseekers get good results because they express their desires explicitly, communicating their thoughts directly.

Further, unless you are told that the person who will be reading your proposal is a specialist in the field, assume like experienced grantspeople that the reader is a well-educated layman, with no specialized knowledge about your particular area of endeavor.

My own rule of thumb is that if a member of my immediate family can't understand what I'm writing about, I need to re-think my

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approach.

Finally, many nonprofit executives see grantmakers strictly as people who drop in once a year to drop off a check. While getting the money may indeed be a grantseeker's favorite part of the relationship, grantmakers don't like to see themselves as mere conduits for money.

They like to be thought of as colleagues and collaborative partners, which is why effective grantseekers stay in touch with them on a regular basis, keep them informed about their progress, and look to them as resourceful business friends.

The "Happily Ever After" Myth

Once a funder says "yes," your financial problems will be over forever.

Once a first grant is awarded, some nonprofit executives have a tendency to be lulled into a sense of false security about future funding. Just as (feminists forgive me!) women of the 1950's learned the hard way that marriage doesn't always represent financial security, and employees of the same era learned the hard way that being a loyal "company man" does not always translate into job security, so grantseekers should face the fact that first grants don't necessarily translate into "happily ever after" either.

Although inertia exerts a positive force in favor of maintaining a relationship once established, funders can be as fickle as husbands and employers. Just as homemakers are often displaced by younger women, and longtime employees are passed over for younger workers with newer skills, so an

organization might find itself on the outs after a time.

Funding priorities change, and funders move on to other causes — some more timely, some just different. Effective grantseekers communicate frequently and are vigilant about changes in direction or interests.

While these realities may be less appealing than the myths they replace, successful grantseekers know that hard work and regular communication are far more dependable than "magic." Understanding the system and predicating your actions on the realities rather than the myths will improve the odds so that the energy put in to grantseeking translates into "dollared affirmation" more often than rejection letters.

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