

8 Tips for Seeking Foundation Grants

Foundation grants only represent about 15% of funds donated to nonprofit organizations in any given year, but nonetheless they represent a key source of funds for many nonprofits.

Here are eight tips or strategies that you can use to generate higher levels of success in pursuing grants from foundations. (While geared towards foundations, many of the strategies would also apply for seeking government grants).

1. Know Yourself

Do you have a clear vision and mission? Do you know what community need you are serving? Is your team aligned around the answer to those two questions?

The universe of legitimate community needs is greater than the universe of funding to address them. If you can't articulate yours and do so in a compelling way likely to excite grantmakers, you're unlikely to stand out from the crowd.

In addition, if you're not clear who you are, you increase the risk that you will chase grants just for the money instead of focusing on those grants that clearly advance your overall organizational strategy.

2. Seek true partnerships

What other organizations are also working to meet the same or overlapping community need? Have you designed your work to either formally collaborate with them or informally align yourself?

If you are formally collaborating, that's a leg up in the grant process since we are in an era where funders are biased in favor of joint proposals.

Even if your collaboration is informal, your ability to articulate the ways in which your work complements others can be a difference maker with funders. But most importantly, ensuring your work strategically aligns with partners actually increases the odds you will have the intended impact you seek.

3. Plan, plan, plan

Do you have a strategic plan? Does it articulate the broad outcomes you hope to achieve and the strategies you'll use to pursue those outcomes?

Do you have a plan for the specific program for which you're seeking funding? Can you articulate its outcomes and how it fits within your broader strategy?

Are the members of your team aligned around these plans or has one or two people created the plans to satisfy the funder, but without the rest of the team being in agreement?

At the strategic level, having a plan helps avoid chasing money. At a program level, having a plan helps ensure your programs will actually be effective and they'll come off as more appealing to funders. Being in internal alignment is critical to effective implementation.

4. Know your Funder's Priorities and Needs

At a basic level, you need to ask: is the work you're seeking to do something the funder will consider funding?

Beyond what they'll consider, does it match up with the funder's priorities?

Imagine two proposals. Proposal A is superbly written, but only tangentially related to funder priorities. Proposal B is adequately written, but clearly related to the funder's priorities. Which is more likely to be funded? The answer is Proposal B.

You have to remember funders aren't giving away money to meet your needs. They're funding to meet **their** needs and it's the overlap that's the key to whether you receive their grants.

5. Develop a Relationship with Funders

Consider two further proposals. Proposal A is superbly written, but from an applicant with no prior relationship with the funder. Proposal B is adequately written, but there's a positive prior relationship. What's more likely to be funded? Again, the answer is proposal B.

Why do relationships matter? Because proposals are evaluated by human beings and human beings have higher confidence in those with whom we have past relationships.

Can you get funded without a relationship? Yes. If your proposal is very well written and it clearly matches the funder's priorities, funders will sometimes make grants that are relatively small from the funder's perspective.

So forge a relationship and only then solicit a grant. In meeting with the grantmaker, focus on asking questions about the foundation (and the program officer's own background) instead of pitching yourself and your organization.

Beyond one-on-one meetings, find opportunities to get to know them at conferences or other events where they are likely to be in attendance.

And over time, make sure program officers for the grantmaker get to know multiple people from your organization instead of just one, so the personal relationship doesn't get eliminated if a staff transition happens.

6. Do your research

To help with getting to know potential funders and their priorities and needs, do your research.

There are free online sources of information on grantmakers and relatively inexpensive ways to do further research, such as the Foundation Center Directory. Grants.gov is also useful if you're looking to get federal grants. Don't forget the funder's own website, of course, which is your best source of information.

Beyond these guides, spend time browsing the websites for allied organizations to determine what foundations are funding them. And don't be afraid to pick up the phone and ask existing funders what other foundations they think you should be approaching.

7. Take the time to write your proposal well

You've done great work, so don't undermine it by dialing in or rushing the actual written proposal.

Read and then re-read the specific funder's instructions so that you're following their desired format.

Give yourself time to draft it with time for editing and review.

In writing it, avoid jargon, and use short sentences and concrete, energetic, and vivid language where appropriate.

(Look for a future Tip Sheet on the elements of a great grant proposal).

Also, even if not required, include a cover letter expressing appreciation for their consideration and summarizing the proposal in one sentence.

8. Report and strengthen the relationship

Don't underestimate the importance of your personal relationship in determining whether you will receive subsequent grants.

Fill out reports on time and emphasize what the funder accomplished through the grant.

But don't wait until the final report to communicate. Make sure the funder receives your general communications. Or send them emails with a brief update, particularly anything in the news.

Best of all, meet with them half-way through the grant to update them on your progress and start the process of asking questions about their future priorities. This is the first and most important step in figuring out what your next grant application to them should involve.