

Explore the Possibilities

Section 2.7

Reflections on Grantseeking

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Homework

No one ever likes it. No one likes it now. But failure to do homework is a major reason most rejected grant applications fail. Not that the project is undeserving; not that the people lack qualifications, vision, dedication and drive. Simply that the necessary homework hasn't been done.

It is frustrating—to all concerned—when the preparer comes in cold. One result may be to pick the wrong foundation, one with no expressed or probable interest in the field with which the application deals, or one which does not provide funding of the type needed, or one whose geographical or other restrictions rule out consideration.

Target Your Application Carefully

So the first step is to identify possible—even better, likely—funding sources. Don't use the broadcast approach in hope that one among the many will find fertile ground. Incidentally, there is no such thing as a “generic proposal” suitable for submission to any and all foundations. A successful proposal is one that has been handcrafted for the individual customer.

If you aren't sure of a foundation's field of activity and policy, ask. You may inquire among your colleagues who have had experience in seeking grants. Look also into publications that describe what particular foundations do. There are a number of national directives, and many states also publish directories. [Many foundations now have Web sites where you can glean important information.]

Don't rely solely on such information, however. It may have one or both of two problems: 1) It may be out of date; the foundation may have changed its interests or policy. {One of the strong qualities of foundations is the ability to change direction on

short notice in order to address new opportunities.} 2) Written information may be couched in vague or general terms. “Support for research,” for example, is not specific enough to be helpful. What kind of research? What kind of support? It can cause you wasted time and frustration, producing an application that is bound to be rejected.

For those reasons, it's best to personally inquire, to make sure that printed information is explicit, current and correct.

Verify That You've Chosen Wisely

Having identified possible sources, I'd write—not phone—their. The written word usually provides clearer, less ambiguous information. The brief letter should explain what the needed support is for; what outcome the program is designed to produce; and—most of all—why *it is important*. Ask whether it falls within the foundation's area of interest and activity and, if so, how to make formal application.

Follow the Guidelines to the Letter

When you receive the information on applying, make sure you understand it. If any part is unclear, not matter how small, be sure to ask so you know *exactly* what it is you are asked to do.

The grantor organization would rather have you ask than to go ahead and write your proposal with wrong assumptions built into it that would require much more time on their part—and yours—later.

Follow the guidelines—exactly. Yes, even if some of them sound strange, irrelevant or ridiculous. Each foundation has arrived at well-thought-out reasons for its guidelines which it has found through experience to be particularly useful in evaluating a grant application.

A carelessly prepared proposal can disguise the merits of an excellent project and cause it to be rejected. At the least, it will cause a delay while the necessary information is being obtained.

Second only to using a broadcast approach in choosing foundations, comes the error of asking grant support for a project clearly outside the foundation's guidelines. Clever writing, or a new slant, will rarely cause a change in viewpoint. That wastes everyone's time.

Foundation annual reports sometimes do contain examples of grants awarded outside the guidelines. But don't take those as precedents that you can count on. A "special case" may represent a particularly timely issue—a "not to be missed" opportunity—or it may be a "test case" for possible new activity.

If you are eager for funding, a single case can appear to presage a trend. But it is highly uncertain that such support will be repeated.

Get a Second Opinion, Even a Third

When the proposal is done, it helps to review it with your colleagues to be sure it's complete—and possibly with disinterested persons to make sure your language is clear and understandable.

Thoughtful second-party review can be of real value. For example, it is frustrating to a foundation to receive material that tells little or nothing about the applicant institution, its people or activities. The assumption sometimes seems to be that the foundation already knows those things.

Even if your organization has a well-known name, don't assume that alone will be communicative. Boy Scouts, for example, differ from one Council to another. Include enough background information or history to convey what is unique and important about your own particular organization.

A common assumption is that, if a foundation solicits proposals in several subject areas, its staff and board members are experts in all those areas. While they are intelligent, inquisitive, accomplished individuals of wide-ranging interests who endeavor to follow developments in a number of fields, they can not be truly expert in every field; so avoid jargon, technical language and acronyms accessible only to members of the inner sanctum. Even highly technical subjects can be described so as to be comprehensible to the intelligent layman.

The Important Must Shine Through

One of the things done least well in grant applications is to convey the *importance* of the project.

The word we use at Murdock Trust is "significance," which may not be much better. It's

surprising how many times people interpret that as "purpose." But the words are no synonymous.

Sometimes when a project's importance is inadequately conveyed, it's because the applicant has not thought it through clearly; or it may be so obvious to the applicant that it must seem obvious to everyone. So the proposal focuses on nuts and bolts and may miss the strongest selling point.

Such statements as, "It should (or will) be of public benefit because..." are helpful to the potential grantor. So are statements describing related work done elsewhere, what the current state of the art is and what the proposed project will do that has not been done or is not being done.

In the application, explain why the project is of such compelling importance that you are willing to invest your own time and resources in it. That may well be the same reason the foundation should invest its efforts.

The importance must be *external*. The project is always significant to the proposer in that it furthers a personally meaningful program he or she believes in. But the only reason for a foundation's existence is for the public good. The proposal should make clear just how the project will benefit the public: How many people will be affected? And—the rough one—how will that effect be measured?

Measurement on a meaningful and understandable basis, more often than not, is extremely difficult. An illustrative example is an art museum or a symphony orchestra. Just what do you "measure" in such a case? It could be something simple like the number of patrons or number of exhibitions or concerts; but what do such numbers really signify? The important question remains, "What does the institution's presence in the community *mean*? What instrument is capable of measuring that?

To take that tough example: How would one describe the significance of a performing arts organization?

First, some things are accepted as givens, things having social importance. The arts are one, not essential in the same sense as food and clothing, but contributing to the quality of life. But one should be able to give specific, persuasive reasons why a particular organization deserves support.

As a recent example, The Trust awarded a grant to support a new performing arts center outside the metropolitan areas. The first reason was that nothing similar existed within the region; it could have a large

potential market. Also, it promised to contribute to the cultural development of a growing area. Then we looked at the quality of the program, which was under excellent direction, both professional and financial. It had a lot of local support that is often the determining factor. People in a community usually are in favor of a new undertaking—so long as someone else is going to do all the financing.

In a proposal, it's wise to lay out all expected funding—and make clear how much local support is to be given. The applying institution itself can—and ideally should—contribute all support possible, if not through dollars, through facilities, materials, labor, volunteers or whatever. It should be clear that the home institution is making a stretching effort.

Stress sound professional management; be candid about any possible trouble spots and how ways around them might be found. It's always best to be up front about the extent of any uncertainties.

Look for Multiple Funding Sources

Whether to rely on one foundation or apply to several can be a double-edged sword. The applicant may fear that a foundation is more likely to reject a proposal if it looks as if someone else may fund it.

Most foundations want to know which other sources you are approaching and for what. If you're in doubt, ask the particular grantor's policy. The Murdock Trust views proposals to other sources of assistance as a plus.

It's likely to be a harder "sell" if the foundation is asked to be the sole support.

Few foundations will fund a project alone, especially if it's a sizable one. They simply won't believe that there are no other possible sources among industries, businesses, individuals, and public, private and corporate foundations. So, reliance on a single source may be interpreted as hope for a bonanza—or a desire to avoid the work of preparing multiple proposals.

Be Concise

The proposal must be thorough, but the writing should be concise, succinct. Do not underestimate the power of the simple declarative sentence. Shun flowery language, bureaucratic terminology, technical jargon and unexplained terms or acronyms.

A common question asks the "proper length" of a proposal. It should be like a Mozart composition—just the notes that are necessary, and not one more.

For that reason, edit your proposal carefully, striking out both irrelevant content and wordy language.

Edit also for a consistent tone. Although the proposal may contain contributions from others whose judgment and background is relevant, it should have one person's voice. A proposal can not be written by committee—nor should it sound as if it has been.

Don't feel apologetic for not being a "professional" writer; that may well be an advantage. Professional application writers often exhibit a sameness in their proposals which becomes all too evident to those who must read them. A straightforward, ungimmicky way of putting things may well be an inviting refreshment.

The proposal should be accompanied by a brief cover letter summarizing the issues, content and significance in a straightforward and friendly tone. It might also be well to extend an invitation to visit and an offer to provide additional specific information if desired.

A simple but often overlooked piece of advice: Double-check for spellings, accuracy of statements and numbers, and completeness of the application. Make sure the mailing is correctly addressed.

Personal Contact May Be Desirable—But Ask First

Most applications and potential applicants feel that face-to-face visits with foundation personnel will strengthen their chances. But they should ask first. The policy and practice among foundations in this regard vary greatly.

In my experience, a personal visit prior to or concurrent with the submission of a written proposal, although it may be a pleasant social occasion, is seldom useful to either the applicant or the Trust. We don't wish to seem remote or unfriendly. But, with over a thousand inquiries and proposals a year, time available for visiting must be used to greatest advantage. Other foundations probably would subscribe to this.

After a proposal has been studied and accepted for formal review, the staff member most directly concerned with it schedules a visit to the applicant organization if feasible; if not, with the appropriate representatives elsewhere. With almost all proposals formally presented to the Trustees for decisions, there has been firsthand contact between the applicants and Trust itself.

Some applicants request the opportunity to present a proposal orally to the Trustees or to supplement a written proposal with a personal appearance. (Possibly they feel more persuasive in person than on paper.) Aside from the logistical problem this would occasion, it would be well for applicants to remember “if it isn’t on paper, it doesn’t exist.”

Leave the End Run to Football

How about someone from, or acting on behalf of, the applicant organization attempting personal contact with the foundation decision makers, i.e. those who have a vote?

There are persons, supposedly “in the know,” who counsel the importance of this. Foundation trustees and officers, not surprisingly, usually refer to it as “lobbying.” In the more colorful parlance of foundation staff members, who are responsible for preparing proposals for review by the decision makers, it is known as the “end run.”

In football, the end run is a standard item in the playbook and is often effective. In grant seeking, more often than not, it results in lost yardage.

Expect an Acknowledgment

Almost all foundations acknowledge receipt of a proposal. If no word comes in a reasonable time, it is not amiss to inquire whether the proposal was received.

It should not annoy a foundation employee to receive calls from applicants about the status of their proposals. After all, it also has a vital interest and responsibility. The tendency of the past for grantors to be aloof and non-communicative, “sparing the applicant a few minutes” in a condescending way, has pretty much gone. The grant-making process now is recognized as a peer-level one. *Both* parties want a worthy project to succeed.

When the proposal is acknowledged, you may be given a date by which time a decision is expected. Otherwise, you can expect a wait of up to some months depending on staff workload, the complexity of the proposal, and requests from and replies to the foundation for clarification or supplemental information. Final review may also await the result of a site visit or the comments of peer reviewers.

Expect a Written Decision

When a decision has been reached, the applicant usually is notified in writing, although informal word of the action may be given prior to that.

If approval is given, the amount and conditions will be stated, together with the obligations of the grantee and directions for administering the grant. These obligations and directions should be carried out in a conscientious and timely manner without your having to be reminded of them.

If the proposal is declined, don’t expect a detailed, specific list of reasons why. Decision-making requires value judgments on answers to many questions. And it requires choices among many worthy proposals vying for funds that are ever inadequate to meet all attractive opportunities and needs.

Try, Try Again?

If a proposal is rejected, is it worth a second try?

Generally not, if all you do is give a warmed-over or more snappily written version of the same proposal. If there has been a major change in the proposal’s content, or in factors which make it more important, then resubmission may be in order. But inquire first. Some foundations may hold a deserving proposal over until the next giving year. (This is not the practice of Murdock Trust.)

Very occasionally, a proposal may be sent back to the applicant saying that the foundation is not convinced but, given additional evidence, it might be. But, lacking that encouragement, resubmitting a retreaded proposal is just a waste of time.

However, almost all foundations welcome new proposals within their fields of interest from whatever qualified sources, including applicants declined before. Declination of an earlier proposal is never held against anyone.

Second Helpings Possible

Having one grant approved may or may not improve your chances another time.

One kind of repeat application seeks to complete a project begun with a previous grant. The other is from the same applicant, but to support a new and different program.

Murdock Trust looks more favorable on the latter, but the proposing institution can show the positive results of a former project as a sign of competence, responsibility and good management. (It helps, in this case, if they did a thorough and conscientious job of follow-up reporting on the first project.)

Many foundations—including Murdock Trust—generally do not give highest priority for further support for projects their own grants began. Those grantees should seek to achieve greater diversity of

funding, so as not to become dependent on a single source. That is for their own well-being and strength.

The Proposal Must Sell the Project

In the best sense of the word, “salesmanship” plays a great part in a proposal’s success. The whole proposal is a sales job. Competition is as fierce in the non-profit area as it is in the commercial arena. Only one out of 15 or so makes it to the final tape.

Salesmanship means paying attention to the “customer”—finding out just what is being asked or required, and providing clear and understandable answers. What’s more, I’d *know* that other candidates will each be putting their best foot forward—always truthfully and accurately, of course.

But selling need not mean extravagant or emotional language or slanted appeals.

There is, I believe, a factual way to present information that is compelling but not tear-jerking. Statistical information on health problems, for instance, can itself be emotional, if it falls in an area of foundation interest. Emotional language in a proposal, while not turning me off personally, does so professionally. I sometimes respond by thinking: “Yes, I know that. What I need to be told is why *this* proposal is the way to solve it.”

Showy formats, flashy design or fancy bindings fail to impress. Neatness, good organization, proper grammar and spelling and ease of reading have no substitutes.

Foundations are similarly unimpressed by name-dropping. Letters of endorsement in glittering generalities by dignitaries or celebrities do little good. Foundations know that often these persons have never seen, let alone studied, the proposal, and that the letter may well have been written by a staff member.

The kind of endorsements that *do* count—and foundations often even ask for these—are statements from current or potential cooperating institutions. If your proposal project counts on assistance from another group, that organization’s statement of evaluation and support would be helpful.

But the “sales” job gets harder all the time.

Funding resources are all too finite. At least for the time being, foundations have been handed, in addition to their normal concerns, problems once largely the province of federal, state and local government. More and more, it is a matter of weighing one worthy proposal against many other worthy proposals. Foundations tend now to look more thoughtfully at what they’re doing and what *effect* they are having.

The idea the “Good works are good for the soul” is being replaced by “A bigger bang for a buck.” Issues are more complex now than they were (or seemed to be). Foundations are less inclined to believe that they are making “save the world” efforts. They work instead toward solving some *part* of a problem—a part that is tractable. Problems themselves have a way of not disappearing quickly, but their consequences can be ameliorated piece by piece.

The applicant needs to bear in mind that the foundation is not really in the business of “giving money away.” Rather than a giver, it is an investor—a venture capitalist. When it supports any activity, it is expecting a *payoff*—a payoff for society.

That payoff must be as explicitly stated and as measurable as can possibly be. That is the *most* important thing to bear in mind when writing a “selling” proposal.