

Think Like a Funder

We've asked a number of program officers for feedback about their 'pet peeves' when it comes to proposals and communication they receive from prospective applicants. Their responses have been remarkably similar whether they work for a government agency or a private foundation, and they offer valuable guidance for every grant writer. Here's what they had to say:

Do your homework.

- Know who else in your area provides similar products or services. We expect you to avoid overlapping or duplicating services already offered in your community.
- Read our organization's website *thoroughly* and make a list of questions before contacting us or writing your proposal. Don't ask us questions that have already been addressed on our website or in our publications.
- If you state in your proposal that you "know" or "think" something, tell us why. How do you know? Give us the statistics or documentation to support your statement, or take it out.
- Contact us directly before starting your proposal. Be sure that you understand the RFP and have interpreted the requirements correctly. Ask about anything you don't understand.
- Be certain of what you actually want or need. Don't come to us just seeking general funding.
- Review what you have written thoroughly *before* you submit it. Make sure it is accurate and consistent throughout.

Follow the directions.

- Use the format we have provided in building your proposal.
- Include complete information and provide every attachment we've requested in our RFP.
- Place complete information in the same section of the proposal where it's asked for – don't make us search for the significant information.
- Don't ignore page number limitations.
- Don't apply for ineligible activities.
- Don't apply to a chemistry foundation for financial education funds!
- Explain project activities in detail – who, what, when, and where.
- Know our foundation's procedures and timeline up front, and be sure they sync with your timeline and ability to comply with our requirements before you submit a proposal.

Despite your need for funds, your application should be about us as much as it is about you.

Spend time matching your program mission and need to our mission and focus. Learn what our funding priorities are, and don't ask for things we don't have an interest in funding.

- Understand our limitations (policy and otherwise) and respect them. Don't attempt to negotiate changes or exemptions just for your program.

- Assume we know nothing about your organization and program, even if you've spoken directly with us. Give us complete information and clearly identify your purpose, need, project goals/objectives, and benchmarks.
- Don't send out proposals en masse -- there's very little that can hurt your chances for funding more than our receiving a proposal with another foundation's name somewhere in the text.
- Document that you have an engaged, active board with members who attend meetings and contribute time and funding, are well organized, and maintain good financial recordkeeping.
- Know what our overall mission is, and why our organization exists. Know how we seek to implement our mission, and help us accomplish that with your proposal.
- Make sure your proposal is clear, precise, and straightforward. Don't give us 'eye wash' or fluff... it's no substitute for good program planning.
- Clearly explain how you will support the program after the end of grant funding. What is your plan to sustain the program for the long term?
- Give us confidence that you can handle our dollars responsibly. Tell us about your past successes and what the impact of your previous projects has been.
- Build real, lasting partnerships and clearly describe them. In today's competitive climate, 'win-win' collaboration with others is required to get even innovative and competitive proposals funded.
- Don't ask for amounts outside the realm of possibility. Know the average size and range of our grant awards and if you're applying to us for the first time, keep your request on the low side of our range.
- If you want to be successful and submit a second grant request in the future, follow up on the first grant and provide the documentation and information we require. Show us how you have spent our money.
- Don't expect us to pick up all the funding without asking others to help. If it is a funding need that will benefit the community, how much is the community investing in the project? Why should we fund a project or program that the community is not funding?
- Be concise in describing your nonprofit, have passion about your mission, and be specific about your greatest funding need.
- Even if we don't require it, follow up at the end of your grant by sharing pictures and a description of the grant's impact.
- Address our questions promptly.

The message from the funders is clear and direct:

- Do your homework
- follow the directions, and
- think like a funder.

The more effectively you accomplish these three guiding principles, the more successful you'll be as a grant writer.