How to Write Proposals that Get Funded

Last year 25,639 private foundations in the U.S. gave away $6.3 billion. This is $11,000 a second. Donors will give money to meet their needs and interests, not yours. The name of the game is to find a good marriage.

To do so, you have to do front end analyses. You want to research foundations’ patterns of giving, geographical restrictions, and areas of interest.

Four Top Reasons Proposals Do Not Get Funded

1. Funding source does not believe you understand the problem
2. Funding source does not believe in your solution
3. Funding source does not believe in your qualifications
4. Funding source does not believe or trust your budget

Foundations and state and national government agencies issue RFP’s (requests for proposals).

1. A PROPOSAL is a representation of your program. - “You never get a second chance to make a first impression.” No misspelled words, no white out. Accurate, crisp, clean.
2. A PROPOSAL is a request. - Don’t forget to ask for the money. Don’t beg. Don’t be arrogant.
3. A PROPOSAL is persuasion.
4. A PROPOSAL is a promise. - Don’t promise what you cannot deliver. Deliver more than you promised.
5. A PROPOSAL is a plan.

Other do’s and don’ts:

DO set up a personal appointment before you write the proposal, especially if seeking money from a corporation.

DO follow directions exactly! Leave no space blank, put N/A. If they say “Write a 300 word description,” write a 300 word description.

You DON’T have to be the low bidder.

Fundraising is an important part of the program planning process. Obviously, sufficient funds to operate a project are essential to its success. However, requesting money from a foundation is not the first step.

Before making a formal request for money, an organization must have a clear idea of its project. Writing a proposal for the project helps staff organize ideas and concepts and develop them into an effective program. A well written proposal should describe the importance of and need for the project as well as outline the organization’s specific plans for implementing it.

A foundation receives many requests for money from a variety of organizations for a range of project ideas. All the proposals compete for the limited amount of money available from the funding agency. Before awarding a grant, a foundation determines the value of the proposed initiative. In order to increase the chances for serious consideration, it is very important that a proposal contain detailed and organized information about the project.

For example, it is unlikely that a foundation will consider a vague request for money to provide sex education and information to out-of-school youth. On the other hand, a foundation will be more interested in a proposal that describes the need for such a program and outlines the objectives, strategies, staffing and specific budget. Such information assists the foundation in assessing the project and in making a final decision about funding it.

Every foundation has special areas of interest and usually only funds programs that address these interests. Therefore, it is important that an organization research the philosophy of a foundation to determine the potential interest in funding a certain project. Needless to say, it would be a poor use of time to prepare a proposal to establish an adolescent family planning clinic and submit it to a funder primarily concerned with agricultural development.

Most general interest libraries, at a university for instance, will have information about foundations. In addition, regional or national family planning associations might also have information useful to those researching foundations with such interests. Once program managers have identified a funder or funders centrally concerned with their issue, they should write to the agency or agencies to request additional information, such as an annual report, funding guidelines, etc. This type of information can provide a clearer idea of the typical nature of projects a foundation funds, the average amount awarded, etc. Program personnel can use these materials to make a proposal relevant to the interests of a foundation and to request a reasonable amount of money.

Similarly, each foundation has its own requirements for submitting proposals. It is recommended that program personnel also learn about the specific procedures and adapt the proposal accordingly before making a request for funds.

There are, however, some general guidelines which apply when writing any proposal. Briefly, “keep the written proposal short and clear.” State at the outset what is to be accomplished, who expects to accomplish it, how much it will cost, and how long it will take.”

The following section describes the basic components that one should keep in mind when writing a proposal.

I. The Components of a Proposal
1. **Summary**
   This section provides a concise overview of the entire proposal. However, it is not an integral part of the formal proposal. The summary should appear on a separate sheet of paper before the text begins. It should include information on the organization, problem or need, project duration, objectives, strategies or methods, and the total funds requested. Although it is at the beginning of the proposal, this section should be written after the proposal itself is written.

2. **Introduction**
   The introduction is a brief profile of the organization submitting the proposal. It states the agency’s background, purpose, and qualifications for conducting the proposed project. The introduction can also include endorsements from other agencies. Example: Established in 1977, the Family Planning Center (FPC) is a private, nonprofit organization. The primary purpose of FPC is to provide reproductive health-related information and services to all population sectors of City X, Y and...

3. **Problem or Needs Statement**
   The statement describes the problem the proposed project intends to address. It offers proof of the need for the program and should include statistics and other factual documentation.
   
   Example: Statistics indicate that adolescents are not receiving adequate family planning information and services to meet their special sexuality-related needs. Whereas the overall pregnancy rate in City X has declined by 5% since 1977, there has been a steady increase in the incidence of pregnancy among young women aged 15-19...

4. **Program Objectives**
   This section lists the expected outcomes, or results, of the proposed project. The objectives are possible solutions to the stated problem or need. They should be *measurable: an observer must be able to see, count, perceive results; and realistic: that is, achievable.*
   
   Examples:
   - To provide family planning information and services to at least 600 young people attending the adolescent clinic.
   - To train at least 20 young people to serve as peer counselors at the adolescent clinic.

5. **Methods**
   The methods section, or program plan, explains in detail how the organization intends to accomplish the stated objectives. In other words, this section discusses in detail the project activities and how, by whom, and when they will be carried out during the project.
   
   Example:
   - Recruit and select at least 20 adolescents who are willing to serve as peer counselors at the clinic.
   - Conduct three half-day training sessions for the peer counselors.

6. **Evaluation**
   This section describes how the progress and success of the program will be measured. Evaluation strategies will depend in part on an individual foundation’s requirements as well as on the nature of the project’s objectives.
   
   Example: At the time of the first visit, each client will be asked to complete a questionnaire, anonymously, requesting information about the purpose of their visit. After three months, the answers will be analyzed to determine the extent to which existing services meet the client’s stated needs.

7. **Other and Future Funding**
   In many cases, a foundation will only grant partial funding for a project. Nevertheless, funders are interested in an organization’s other sources of money, for both current and future program activities. The other and future component outlines an organization’s plans to obtain alternate and additional funds to conduct other aspects of the project and/or to continue the project after the proposed grant expires.
   
   Example: The Family Planning Center has received a grant for $10,000 from the CDE Foundation to cover general operating costs of the project. For the second project year, staff will seek funds from local community sources...

8. **Budget**
   This section is an important component of the proposal. The budget “should be a realistic estimate of all costs involved in implementing and operating the project Cost estimates should be broken down into logical categories, such as salaries, supplies, rent, etc.” A budget not only outlines how the requested funds will be spent, but also how the money received from other sources will be allocated.
   
   Example:
   
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>ABC Foundation</th>
<th>Other Sources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Share of Budget</td>
<td>Share of Budget</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Salaries</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director (full-time)</td>
<td>4000.00</td>
<td>1000.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asst. Director (full-time)</td>
<td>2800.00</td>
<td>700.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nurse (half-time)</td>
<td>1500.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Salaries</strong></td>
<td>8300.00</td>
<td>1700.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

9. **Appendices**
   A proposal should be concise. Appendices provide the opportunity to include additional supportive information without making the text of the proposal long and disjointed. Such attachments might include the results of a preliminary needs assessment survey, the organization’s annual report, and staff biographies.

10. **Cover Letter**
    A short cover letter should be sent with the proposal when it is submitted to the funding agency. In the letter, the organization asks the foundation to consider the proposal, briefly summarizes the purpose of the project, states the amount requested, and suggests follow-up action (e.g., meetings, more information to be sent, etc.).

**II. Checklist of the Components of a Proposal**
Section B describes the components of a proposal. This section provides a "checklist" of what should be included under each component.

The following list has been adapted and revised from the "Proposal Checklist and Evaluation Form," developed by the Grantsmanship Center.* Proposal writers can refer to the list to ensure that their proposals encompass all the typical characteristics.

1. **Summary**
   Appears at the beginning of the proposal; is interesting; clearly, concisely, and briefly summarizes request.
   1. Identifies the grant applicant
   2. Includes at least one sentence on the organization's qualifications
   3. Includes at least one sentence on the problem
   4. Includes at least one sentence on objectives
   5. Includes at least one sentence on methods
   6. Includes total cost, funds already obtained and amount requested in the proposal.

2. **Introduction**
   Describes the applicant agency and its qualifications for funding; is brief, interesting, and free of jargon; leads logically to the problem statement.
   - Clearly establishes who is applying for funds
   - Describes applicant agency purposes and goals, programs and activities, and clients or constituents
   - Provides evidence of the applicant's accomplishments (with statistics, if possible)
   - Possibly offers quotes/endorsements in support of accomplishments
   - Supports qualifications in area of activity in which funds are sought (e.g., research, training)

3. **Problem Statement of Needs Assessment**
   Relates to purposes and goals of applicant agency; is of reasonable dimensions, makes a compelling case; makes no unsupported assumptions; is brief, interesting, and free of jargon.
   - Is supported by statistical evidence and/or statements from authorities
   - Is stated in terms of clients' needs and problems, not the applicant's

4. **Program Objectives**
   Describes program outcomes in measurable terms; are outcomes, not methods.
   - At least one objective for each problem or need committed to in problem statement.
   - Describes the population that will benefit
   - States the time by which objectives will be accomplished

5. **Methods**
   Describes activities to be conducted to achieve the desired objectives; presents a reasonable scope of activities that can be conducted within the time and resources of the program.
   - Flows naturally from problems and objectives
   - Clearly describes program activities and reasons for the selection of activities
   - Describes sequence of activities
   - Describes staffing of program
   - Describes clients and client selection

6. **Evaluation**
   Presents a plan for determining the degree to which objectives are met and methods are followed.
   - Presents a plan for evaluating accomplishments of objectives
   - Presents a plan for evaluating and modifying methods over the course of the program
   - Tells who will be doing the evaluation and how they were chosen
   - Clearly states criteria of success
   - Explains how data will be gathered and any test instruments or questionnaires to be used
   - Describes the process of data analysis
   - Describes any evaluation reports to be produced

7. **Other and Future Funding**
   Describes a plan for continuation beyond the grant and/or the availability of other resources necessary to implement the grant. a.
   - List other sources of funding committed to project
   - Presents a specific plan to obtain other needed and future funding if program is to be continued
   - Is accompanied by letters of commitment, if necessary

8. **Budget**
   Clearly delineates costs to be met by the funding source and those provided by other parties; is detailed in all aspects.
   - Tells the same story as the proposal narrative
   - Contains no unexplained amounts for miscellaneous or contingency
   - Includes all items asked of the funding source
   - Includes all items paid for by the other sources
   - Details fringe benefits, separate from salaries
III. Conclusions

As previously mentioned, an organization seeking funds for a project should learn as much as possible about a foundation and its grant-making procedures before submitting a proposal. The final presentation should conform to an individual funding agency's requirements.

While the format may differ, the basic content of any proposal includes similar information. These standard components have been outlined in Sections B. and C. of this document. The Council of Michigan Foundations offers some additional general suggestions to follow when preparing a proposal:

1. Write as simply and clearly as possible. Avoid using slang or phrases that are not commonly understood or that could be easily misunderstood.
2. Keep the proposal as short as possible while still maintaining the substance. Remember to try to match your interests with those of foundation.
3. Avoid broad or sweeping statements. Issues, problems and needs should be stated as accurately and factually as possible.
4. Test the proposal on others not familiar with it before submission.
5. Be prepared to rethink and rewrite the proposal.

Obtaining funds to implement adolescent fertility-related projects is not an easy task. Foundations consider many requests for funds, and they base their grant award decisions on the proposals they receive. It is to the benefit of the organization to take time to research and prepare a solid, well-written proposal. The above guidelines can assist project staff in writing a proposal, an important aspect of fundraising.