

Answered by Amy Karjala, Principal – OneAccord Partners

THE ROLE OF GRANTS

I don't have the staff to do this. Wouldn't I just be better off if I could contract with someone else to write my grants?

Sure, you could. But then the contract would end and you would be no better at securing grants than you were before. And, if grants are part of a healthy ministry, then you need the internal capacity to carry out this discipline. So, it's usually better to coach somebody how to do this, so we then embed that skill set there.

But sometimes, there isn't any one on staff. But that's the cool thing about an overall commitment to the MIF philosophy. The question becomes, for whom is writing or researching grants the next good step in their growth in the cause?

The best grant writers are those who know your organization, understand the cause and can follow directions well. Period.

We have a much higher percentage of income from grants than the 10-15% recommended. Why is that a bad thing?

All causes and organizations have a unique blend, and those numbers are just a guide. However, grant makers are among the least likely to make the same or bigger gifts year after year. That means, grant income is typically less reliable for ongoing funding. So, we always recommend ministries lay the groundwork for a solid base of local support from individuals. It sends a message of stability to grant makers when you want to do the next big thing, and provides greater stability for your organization.

FUNDABLE PROJECTS

It seems like foundations always want to help with something new, and we are more concerned about meeting the budget for current operations. Do foundations ever give to that?

Yes, they do...but not often. Foundations typically want to help ministries get bigger, better, faster or stronger at *addressing the cause*. Even still, sometimes ministries need to look at their current operations budget differently. Are there new or expanded program offerings that could be presented to a foundation? What are the real costs involved in those? Staffing? Supplies?

GRANT WRITING

Frequently Asked Questions



Our biggest need is someone to do development for us. Do foundations ever fund that?

You bet! This is a common type of grant. Why? Because it is something that makes you bigger, better, faster and stronger at engaging people in your cause. This is often called a capacity building grant.

What we really need is a new building. Are there still grants for capital projects?

There are, but there don't seem to be as many. Most bricks and mortar projects that get funded now can show how that project has a direct, positive impact on the cause. When a building can be tied to impact on the cause and if it is part of program expansion, there may be some opportunities. The main point is, if the reason you need a new building is that the old office building is falling down, you're not going to get many takers. If you need a new building to serve a new population in a more meaningful way, then you have a chance.

RESEARCH AND RELATIONSHIP

Where do I start looking for potential foundation partners?

There are lots of resources available at a variety of price points. One of the best is Foundation Directory Online through The Foundation Center (www.foundationcenter.org). Most major cities have at least one library that offers this resource for free (www.foundationcenter.org/collections/), or you can subscribe on the website for a significant fee.

Ask others at peer organizations how they search for grants in your area.

What if it says the foundation doesn't accept unsolicited proposals, but we're a perfect fit otherwise? How do we make that list?

That's what is so cool about an orientation towards partnership. It allows you to have a conversation when money is not the objective. This is when I would say "Hey, I saw the work you did over here...and we want to do something like that. I'd love to hear what you learned from that."

Do you have to know somebody to get a grant? Can I just write a proposal and get money?

It certainly doesn't hurt to know someone, but don't despair if your ministry doesn't have connections like these. Take some time to develop them. Start by talking to the foundation, learning about what they exist to accomplish and what trends they are seeing. Ask what they learned through a particular project. Don't start with a hand out. Instead, listen and learn.

What if we haven't received grants before and we have some issues that funders might worry about?

It certainly helps to have received previous grants but it isn't a requirement. A solid base of individual donors, steady growth in support and impact and solid planning are more important than grant history.

And, if you have issues that you're worried about, be honest about them. Talk to the foundation ahead of time. Tell them the issues you've had and the things you've done to address them. Chances are, your candor will be refreshing...especially since they would have spotted them anyway. You've neutralized a potential trigger to get your proposal tossed.

AHH! The foundation is coming for a site visit. What do I do?

Act natural. Really. This is a partner coming to see your operation. It's understandable to do a little dusting, but this isn't a visit by the Queen. Foundations want to see what is really happening. It's their due diligence to make sure you're real and legitimate. They know our work is sometimes messy. Transparency is compelling. When they know they're getting straight answers from you, the relationship is strengthened.

THE PROPOSAL

Does it help to do something to make my proposal stand out? Colored/fancy paper? Binding?

Almost never. Most foundations have protocol for copying and distributing proposals. White paper with black ink copies best. And, if they have to remove staples or binding to get the copies made, that just annoys people. If things need to be separated, paper clips work well. If you're worried about marks left on the paper, use a post-in under or instead of the paper clip.

We have a really cool DVD of our latest project. Should I send it along with the proposal?

Probably not. Foundation program officers have piles of stuff they never get to. Your DVD is more likely to become a coaster than actually get viewed. Tell the foundation the story in the format they request.

We're stuck! We're working on this proposal and aren't sure how to organize our project, which things the foundation might fund! What next?

Get advice. Often, you can actually talk to the foundation staff about this. Invite them to be part of the brainstorming session. If that isn't an option, find folks on your board or other advisors who can help.

The foundation's requested budget format makes no sense with our categories. What do I do?

First off, foundations ask for this format for a reason, so it's important not to just send our own format. So, we find a way to adapt. Talk with your finance person/people/advisor about how to rearrange your budget to answer the foundation's questions. Remember, if you get the grant, you'll also have to report back to the foundation in these categories. On rare occasions, there really doesn't seem to be a way to make it work. Then, perhaps call the foundation and see if they have a recommendation.

The foundation asks how we will evaluate the project. What are they looking for?

The foundation wants to see that you have thought through what success looks like for the project. They want to be able to show the impact of their gift. So this needs to be measurable. For example, "every quarter we will assess usage rates at each location and report the figure to program staff. At the end of year one, we hope to see usage rates climb to 10% and increase to 30% by the end of year three."

I hear a lot about foundations wanting to know how the project will be sustained after the grant runs out. We hope to get other grants and gifts to cover it. Is that enough?

It's not enough to hope. If you have a plan for securing those gifts from individuals, businesses or foundations, that can often work. It's important to be realistic. People don't usually just start throwing money at a good idea. You have to have a plan for engaging people in the project.

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[Amy Karjala](#) is an experienced nonprofit professional, writer and organizational strategist whose background covers philanthropy from many sides: student to trainer, fundraiser to donor, and grant seeker to grant maker. As a sought-after grants expert, Amy has provided grant strategy and writing services to nonprofit organizations both large and small.