Writing a winning grant proposal

Competition is as fierce as it has ever been for private and public grants to not-for-profits. If your funding model depends on receiving adequate grant money, you can't afford to submit sloppy, unprofessional grant proposals. Here are some tips on writing a winner.

Do your research

Just as you'd research potential employers before applying for a job, you should get to know grant-making organizations before asking for their support. Familiarize yourself with the grant-maker's primary goals and objectives, the types of projects it has funded in the past, and its grant-making processes and procedures.

Performing research enables you to determine whether your programs are a good fit with the grant-maker's mission. If they aren't, you'll save yourself time and effort in preparing a proposal. If they are, you'll be better able to tailor your proposal to your audience.

Support your request

Every grant proposal has several essential elements, starting with a single-page executive summary. Your summary should be succinct, using only the number of words necessary to define your organization and its needs. You also should include a short statement of need that provides an overview of the program you're seeking to fund and explains why you need the money for your program. Other pieces include a detailed project description and budget, an explanation of your organization's unique ability to run this program, and a conclusion that briefly restates your case.

Support your proposal with facts and figures but don't forget to include a human touch by telling the story behind the numbers. Augment statistics with a glimpse of the population you serve, including descriptions of typical clients or community testimonials.

Follow the rules

Review the grant-maker's guidelines as soon as you receive them so that if you have any questions you can contact the organization in advance of the submission deadline. Then, be sure to follow application instructions to the letter. This includes submitting all required documentation on time and error-free. Double-check your proposal for common mistakes such as:

- Excessive length,
- Math errors,
- Overuse of industry jargon, and
- Missing signatures.

Take the time

To produce a winning proposal, you need to give yourself a generous time budget. Researching the grant-maker, collecting current facts and statistics about your organization, composing a compelling story about your work and proofreading your proposal all take more time than you probably think they do. Above all, don't leave grant proposal writing to the last minute.