

Do This, Don't Do That: How to Get Your Proposal Funded

Excerpt from *"Thank You for Submitting Your Proposal": A Foundation Director Reveals What Happens Next*

In my role as executive director of the Cedar Tree Foundation (Boston, Massachusetts), I've noticed over time that certain questions come up again and again, because they're on the minds of many people who apply to many foundations. I'd like to deal with two of those questions here: *How can I get my proposal read?* and *Are there common mistakes proposal writers make?*

Six Things You Can Do to Help Your Proposal Make the First Cut

1. Write a compelling summary.

What if you knew that huge sums of money, perhaps a month or two of your organization's payroll, were riding on 200 or 400 words? Wouldn't you pay scrupulous attention to that writing? Your proposal will only get read if the summary provides a reason for the program officer to dig deeper. Fuss over the summary until it sparkles.

2. List concrete, specific outcomes of your work.

People want to know exactly what they are going to get for their money. That's why so many of the things we buy come in transparent packaging. Your proposal should be a clear container that shows exactly what will result from the funder's investment. Concrete, measurable results provide core reasons for funders to support you.

3. Connect each step of your work with your goals.

Many proposals fail to show how specific actions will lead directly to meeting goals. Strong proposals are like railroad bridges—they have steel girders connecting every point. Most often, proposal writers fail to make those connections because the relationship between what they want and what they do seems obvious to them. It needs to be spelled out.

4. Present a budget in standard format that is legible and patently sensible.

People who have never used a spreadsheet as well as those who live and breathe spreadsheets can be equally injurious to explaining your money plan. Spreadsheet jockeys need to be kept from creating dense forests of tiny numbers. But also don't let someone take their maiden spreadsheet voyage creating the budget that

will be vetted by a foundation's experts. And make sure everything in the proposal is accounted for in the budget. Conversely, omit items in the budget that are not fully explained in the proposal narrative.

5. Get the proposal in early.

Ostentatiously beating the deadline gives the impression that you can plan well and get things done. The reality of foundation deadlines is that if your proposal arrives early, it will stand out, because most proposals arrive at the last moment.

6. Offer to meet. Once.

Let the funder know you would be glad to come by and talk about your work, and, if appropriate, bring other staff or board members. If the funder says OK, set up the meeting on their terms. If they're reluctant, let it drop, so you don't provide a reason for the funder to stop taking your calls.

Let's now move on to some of the common pitfalls of proposal writers.

Five Mistakes Too Many Grant Applicants Make

1. Talking mainly about problems, not solutions.

Grantseekers sometimes confuse writing proposals with authoring pamphlets meant to educate and mobilize the public. Your proposal should show that you're familiar with the details of the issue, but most of a good proposal will focus on exactly what you're going to do about the problem.

2. Describing specific problems with general solutions.

A proposal will succeed to the extent it provides a clear picture of what will be done about the issue being addressed. Too often proposal writers pour their hearts into the details of the problem, and then resort to vague generalities about their actual activities.

This lack of concrete action in a proposal might result simply from the proposal writer not having a clear picture of what's being done by others in his or her organization. Much worse, it might mean the group needs to slow down the fundraising until they have done a better job of strategic planning.

3. Prolific use of buzzwords and jargon.

Some proposal writers confuse density with erudition. What sells the work to funders is clear, simple prose that tells a story or paints a picture. Vague claims, fuzzy or trendy language, and obscure terms don't impress funders—quite the contrary.

4. Budgets that don't add up.

It seems so obvious, but enough proposals arrive on the desks of foundation executives with math mistakes to make it worth pointing out how much these careless errors undermine credibility. The budget should not only add up, it also has to support the logic of the proposal's narrative. Therefore a \$100,000 budget to reconstruct 16 flooded houses won't make sense, nor will \$700,000 to hire two new staff.

5. Parroting the funder's guidelines without linking them to the work.

It's difficult to understand why so many people think that pasting phrases from the funder's guidelines into their proposal will unlock the money box. If the funder says they seek to support people working to improve the health of city children, don't tell the funder that your organization exists "to improve the health of city children."

All successful proposals need to fit within the foundation's guidelines, but detailing how and why they fit is the key to success, not simply showing you have read the funder's Web site.

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