

# Cultivating Relationships with Grant Makers

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In a world saturated with e-mail, text messaging, online data, voicemail, forms and regulations, we're often dissuaded or distracted about a simple fact of life: relationships are everything. So it is true with grants.

Grants are conceived, approved and administered by human beings. As grant writers and applicants for grants, we need to understand how to reach those human beings and work to cultivate relationships with grant makers. But how? This article suggests some practical tips to help you foster positive relationships with potential grant makers so that you can enhance your chances of success in winning grants.

Careful research to find the right "relationship tree" is the first step. This means that when you identify a potential grant opportunity for your municipality, whether from a public or a private grant source, search for contacts and relationships affiliated with the grant maker.

- ▶ Is there a contact person listed in the application instructions? If so, don't hesitate to call that person and ask your questions. Related tip: Read through the grant application materials first, and thoroughly. Write down your most important questions ahead of time. This will help you when you make the call. If the person answering the phone cannot help you, ask for the name and phone number of someone who can. Or see if there is a way to e-mail your questions. Many grant givers will accept written questions which they will then publish with answers.
- ▶ Is there a Board of Directors, a Grant Committee, an Executive Director, or other persons in charge of approving the grant? Get their names and affiliations. Do you know any of them? Does your supervisor or development committee know any of them? We are all "degrees of separation" from one another, and so it is not uncommon to route your grant application to people who may have affiliations with the grant maker organization.

Informational sessions of the grant maker also provide a wealth of opportunities to cultivate relationships with the grant maker and to obtain vital information about the grant. Such sessions are often announced when the grant opportunity is first published. Go! If there are multiple sessions, you should consider going to more than one of them. Chances are, you will gain even more insights and reinforce your relationships. Of course, be professional—and don't be a nag! But do use these opportunities to maximum advantage. Be a sponge. Take copious notes. Ask, ask, ask. Learn about your potential competition for the grant. You might pick up tips from them as well!

Check in regularly with the grant maker—via that first contact person on the phone, or persons you met at the informational sessions. But do your due diligence first by updating your information from the grant web site or published grant information. Questions you may have along the way could include:

- ▶ Are the grant deadlines still the same?
- ▶ Will you be reviewing applications in the order they are received? If so, will you accept an application in advance of the deadline?

- ▶ Is there still funding available in the grant program? If so, how much? Will there be additional funding provided?
- ▶ Are there any special considerations for this grant—e.g., eligibility criteria, grant size awarded, geographic coverage, special causes or populations to be addressed?

If your municipality is planning an important event that is relevant to your grant application, by all means, send a formal invitation to the event to your potential grant maker with a brief cover note! This is often overlooked as an opportunity. Even if the grant maker is unable to attend, the grant maker may send a representative. The grant maker also will know that your programs are alive and active.

Always be networking. If you are active in professional groups, organizational meetings, committees and community affairs related to your cause, this can yield relationship dividends beyond your wildest expectations. A good networker will always:

- ▶ actively engage with people—talk, ask questions, be a sponge for valuable information, reach out and don't be shy!
- ▶ carry business cards and give them out to everyone you meet
- ▶ collect business cards from everyone you meet and take an active interest in finding out what the person does, whom he/she knows and what recommendations he/she may have for you
- ▶ be direct and have a message—a succinct, 30-second “elevator pitch” about who you are and what you are seeking, as simple, precise and compelling as you can make it.

Once you have applied for any grant, it's a great idea to follow up. This means checking in with the grant maker to make sure that your application is properly in place, finding out about any updates on the timeline or process for consideration, and finding out your status. Again be professional and don't be a nag, but DO be pro-active. If you receive a letter from the grant maker acknowledging receipt, do follow up with a check-in call. You may not find out anything new, but then again you might.

Finally, if your grant application is rejected, do not dismay. Take the opportunity to turn this into a positive event. Call the grant maker and ask for a frank assessment. Why was your application unsuccessful? Will you have another opportunity to apply, and if so, when? What were the deciding factors, and what, if anything, can you do next time to make your grant application a winner? People respect those who are self-critical and who sincerely seek an honest evaluation. Remember, this is not about “venting” your frustration over a losing application, but about learning for next time and cultivating positive relationships all around you.

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