

## WHAT MAKES A GOOD PROPOSAL GREAT

### Before You Start

- Develop a clear strategy; identify your specific funding need and assess what components make it attractive to a potential funder.
- Research the funder in advance; your idea should match their funding interests and your strategy should fit their decision-making process. Many resources are available at the public library, or at Guidestar, the 990-PF, and the funder's website.
- Identify key influencers who may need to be engaged as part of the application process.
- Call and discuss your idea with a program officer or board member before jumping into a proposal. Ask questions along the way if you have them.
- Figure out whether the funder uses an electronic grant application platform or if they prefer paper or a jump drive.
- If all else fails, do not send an unsolicited proposal. Send a letter of inquiry and ask for an opportunity to discuss by phone or in person. Follow up if you don't hear back within 30 days.

### Content

- Write with your audience in mind – put yourself in the reader's shoes.
- Start with a clearly stated and compelling need or idea.
- State your request up front – dollar amount and terms, e.g., number of years or contingencies.
- Develop a solid, well-written case for support (not just "we need the money" or "we are a great organization, you should support us").
- Include a brief overview of your organization with your vision, mission and geographic service area (don't assume we know).
- Be succinct and assume we are not familiar with your organization's operating structure and/or the project details.
- Focus on localized data and research if you have it. Including some numbers/research to make the case is important, but don't overwhelm us.
- Share results from other cities if you hope to replicate a model program here.
- Demonstrate innovation where possible, such as how you use technology to accomplish your goals.
- Identify how you will evaluate/measure success (impact metrics) by sharing your anticipated *outcomes* (what will change as a result of this grant), not just *outputs* (numbers served, attendees at performances, etc.).
- Try to stand out from the pack (we read hundreds of applications per year). Educate your funder about the landscape of others doing similar work; then differentiate yourself from others in the field.
- Be creative. Make it interesting. Inspire us to want to fund you.
- Include a link to your website.

## Format

- Write in a business-like style; eliminate “we” and “our” and other first-person pronouns when possible.
- If you’re using an electronic application platform or a template such as the Common Grant Application, follow the directions.
- Answer the questions asked without being repetitive or redundant.
- Use acronyms and jargon sparingly – we are not experts in your field.
- Always include a budget and make sure project and/or organizational budgets add up correctly. If there’s a major discrepancy between last year’s actuals and this year’s budget, explain it to us.
- It’s okay to include administrative expenses (overhead) as a line item in the project budget as long as the percentage is reasonable.
- Program vs. Administrative vs. Fundraising expenses – the numbers in these categories as reflected on your 990 are familiar to funders, so consider organizing your budget around these buckets.
- Avoid excessive adjectives and adverbs (tell us the facts, not how you feel about it – everyone thinks their project is outstanding)
- Use client quotes minimally or to illustrate a story – save additional quotes for the grant evaluation report.
- Keep national research statistics to a minimum – focus on local information.
- Use good grammar and spell words correctly. Use active voice, not passive.
- Make time for a gut check before you hit send – have someone else proofread the proposal.

## Other Tips

- You can offer to send them as a follow up, however, do not include extra attachments unless the funder requests them.
- Funders are human, so if you need more time to turn in a proposal, be honest and communicate with us prior to the deadline.
- Program Officers are your advocates but not your friends. It is okay to ask us for advice, but please do not be offended if we say no to coffee, lunch or a site visit.
- And please do not be annoyed if we ask follow-up questions. It’s our job to anticipate questions that the decision-makers on the grants committee or board of directors may ask. Program officers want to help you put your best foot forward.
- In the end, your proposal is a front door to your organization. Make us feel welcome to enter and learn more.

*At Ignite Philanthropy, we welcome your feedback about how to make the process of applying for a grant a positive experience. Contact Annemarie Henkel, Vice President of Philanthropic Services, at [ahenkel@ignitephilanthropy.com](mailto:ahenkel@ignitephilanthropy.com) or 513-381-1848.*