

Step 12

Sustaining Relationships with Funders

YOUR ORGANIZATION CREATED a great program plan that addresses a truly compelling need. Then, following the *Winning Grants Step by Step* twelve-step model, you wrote a stellar grant proposal, and you followed the funder's guidelines when preparing and mailing your full proposal package. Mission accomplished? Well, not quite yet.

Following Up on Your Organization's Proposal

Many funders will say in their grant guidelines that they require a certain number of weeks or months to review all applications, and they will request that organizations not call during that period. In addition, more funders are incorporating site visits into their grantmaking processes, and they want to save all discussion and questions for that time. However, if not specifically mentioned otherwise in their guidelines, it is a good idea to make a follow-up call after a couple of weeks to confirm receipt of your proposal and find out what the next steps are in the process.

Managing a Site Visit

A *site visit* is exactly what its name implies: the funder comes to your organization's *site* (or the site of the proposed program) to *visit* with leaders, staff, board members, and those the organization serves. Not every organization requesting funding gets a site visit, because it is a part of the vetting process for proposals that are in the advanced stage of consideration. You should also understand that a site visit is by no means an assurance of funding for your program. What it does mean is that there is enough of a match between the grantmaker, the organization, and the proposed program that the funder believes it warrants further investigation.

When a site visit is requested, the key staff assigned to the program are essential to the process because they (ideally) were the people who created the program plan, and they are the ones (again, ideally) who will be responsible

for the hands-on implementation of the project. They should be present during the visit, as should the executive director and the person who can answer financial or budgetary questions. If the program targets a specific group of people, representation in the form of one or more individuals from the population to be served or engaged is always welcome, as they can provide the most useful testimony for your project, its significance, and its power for change.

If your nonprofit has been selected for a site visit, use the following to-do list to prepare:

- Confirm the participation of all key persons involved with the program.
- Send the full proposal to everyone participating, and request that they (re)familiarize themselves with it.
- If the funder has provided questions in advance of the site visit, share those as well.
- Meet with everyone in advance of the actual site visit to ensure that everyone is on the same page in terms of knowledge about the program and its goals, objectives, and methods and that everyone understands who will be answering which questions and moderating the visit.
- Make sure beverages are available for the visit, but keep it basic: no need for catering or any other “special event” details.

If the grantmaker has requested a tour of some sort, decide what the important elements are for the funder’s representatives to see and plan the tour in advance—again informing everyone who will be a part of it what is happening and when. Make sure everything is in order and try to schedule the tour for a time when they can see the programs in action; check with staff to make sure it won’t be disruptive to have visitors or violate clients’ confidentiality or privacy in any way.

Keeping the Funder Informed

Remember when you prepared your program budget and you mentioned all the other sources you were approaching as well? Keeping prospective funders up to date on which of these other grantmakers has awarded a grant to your program or has declined your request at this time is always recommended. As new grant requests are submitted, you again want to notify all foundations that are currently considering your program that you are approaching additional funders. Refer back to each individual funder’s guidelines to be sure you are honoring any requests that that funder has made regarding being open to phone calls and e-mail communication during the review process.

Responding to the Funder's Decision

It is inevitable: funding decisions will be made. When they are, you and your organization's staff will either be jumping for joy or holding your heads in your hands. Believe it or not, you need to move forward with your relationship-building regardless of which way the decision falls.

When the Proposal Is Funded

There is nothing like getting that call, letter, or e-mail informing you that your organization's proposal has been funded. It is the best, regardless of the size of the grant. So after the *yippees* are shouted, you need to get back to business—remember, you are building a relationship. A telephone call to your program officer is certainly in order as soon as you receive word that your request is being approved. As busy as program officers are, they all want to hear about how the programs—and organizations—they've funded are progressing. In most foundations the process of the grantmaking system requires program officers to advocate for the programs they are recommending for funding. Your program officer has gone to bat on your behalf to get you those funds, so consider her a partner and keep her apprised on a quarterly basis with a brief note, an e-mail, a call, a personalized newsletter, or whatever form of communication you think is most effective and appropriate.

I like when grantees take the initiative to schedule a site visit for me at least once a year. This allows me to be in touch, without feeling overbearing or intrusive, and to feel like I am doing a better job of monitoring my docket. Also, I really appreciate it when a grantee calls me to get input on an organizational issue they may be facing during the course of their project. It helps me to stay connected with the organization, and to understand how the project is proceeding. Then when I get the regular written evaluations of the grants, I am seldom surprised by anything in it. I have always thought that if a funded project didn't change during the life of the grant from what was anticipated during the application stage, then something was seriously awry in either the implementation of the project, or the reporting on it.

—GWEN I. WALDEN

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Following your telephone call to the program officer—and within three to five days of notification—you need to send a formal letter of thanks to the funder that is signed by the executive director or the board chair, or both.

In general, funders expect some sort of public recognition of their grants. Standard forms of recognition include a feature in the grantee's newsletter and inclusion on a donor list on the recipient's website or in the annual report. Consider the level of recognition in proportion to the amount of funds received; that should guide you toward choosing the appropriate recognition level. A large grant may warrant special recognition at your organization's annual event, if there is one, a ceremony of some sort, or a media announcement. Ultimately, if anything beyond a newsletter mention and inclusion in your donor list is being considered, it should be discussed with the funder in advance of making any decisions. You do not want your organization to engage in "surprise" or unwanted donor recognition.

If the funding institution (or the grant) is to remain anonymous, the funder will clearly stipulate that fact in its grant award letter to you. Of course in such situations the funder's name should not be mentioned anywhere publicly, and care should be taken in all internal records to mark the grant-maker as anonymous.

When a grant is awarded, the nonprofit will

- Receive initial notification of the award, usually informally through a phone call or e-mail.
- Receive official confirmation in the form of a *grant agreement* letter.
- Have your organization's executive director and other appropriate staff (such as the person responsible for program implementation and the person responsible for organization finances) review this document to ensure that the nonprofit will be able to comply with all of its stipulations, as it is a legally binding agreement.
- Return the letter—signed by the executive director—within three to five days of receipt.
- Provide quarterly, semiyearly, or yearly progress reports. Each funder has different requirements, but these will be spelled out clearly in the grant agreement letter. Timely reports are especially critical if the nonprofit hopes to be eligible to reapply to this funder for further support.

Notify the funder of all major changes or issues you have identified in your program as soon as possible. Staffing changes, a particular method that is not working, and participant recruitment that is well below what was originally targeted—these are all examples of situations about which your funding partner should be informed.

When the Proposal Is Not Funded

Your mail comes and there it is: an envelope from the funder. Upon reading it you find that your proposal was not approved. There will be dozens—and in some cases hundreds—of other organizations just like yours that receive the same declination letter. So what happened? Why was your organization's program not selected? On average, a typical foundation can make grants in response to approximately 8 to 10 percent of the total requests it receives in every funding cycle. Sometimes the approval rate is even significantly lower than that, especially for the largest foundations in the United States.

Your organization's declination letter will likely be very general and provide you with only vague reasons for the denial. So you might want to follow up with your program officer via e-mail to see if you can get more detail as to why your organization's proposal was not funded. Consider asking the following three questions in your e-mail:

- Were there any parts of the funder's guidelines that you missed? (You want to find out up front if your proposal was disqualified for any reason.)
- Was additional information or further clarity needed in your program plan or grant proposal to make it more competitive?
- Is it recommended that you resubmit this proposal for consideration at another time? If so, when?

You also want to thank the funder for considering your request and for taking the time to respond to your e-mail. Let politeness be the rule, and remember that there is always the next cycle.

The reality is this: there are many stellar programs that do not get funded. There are compelling grant proposals that do not get funded. The demand for foundation and corporate (and government) grants is simply too high—and competition for these dollars grows more stiff each and every year.

So how can you make your organization, program, and proposal stand out? Be organized, truthful, respectful, consistent, and persistent in your grantseeking endeavors. It is vital that you keep in mind that a denial from a funder does not mean that your program lacks merit, nor does it mean that your program will never get funded.

There are more reasons than pages in this workbook that might explain why the funder has denied your proposal; just continue building your relationships. Consider keeping all the funders you've identified as a match for your programs—even if they have denied your request for funding—on your mailing list; also invite them to your events, and continue to share

Reality Check

Be persistent. One human service organization in Northern California was turned down by a certain local foundation well over a half dozen times but continued to cultivate a relationship with the program officer over a five-year period. When the foundation launched an initiative that happened to be closely aligned with the nonprofit's mission and purpose, the program officer actually initiated contact with the nonprofit, because they now had a relationship. And you know what happened next. The nonprofit submitted a proposal and was funded—and has a relationship with that funder to this day.

organization successes with them via periodic updates through e-mails and other communications.

The takeaways from *Winning Grants Step by Step, Third Edition*, are twofold. First, we wanted to provide you with the time-tested, nuts and bolts of proposal development and a framework for how they should come together. Much of the material in the second edition also remains relevant now—it works. Second, we wanted to provide some additional context for the grantseeking process itself. As we have mentioned in several places in this workbook, a well-written, well-organized grant proposal is a critical component of the funding equation, but there is more you need to do to ultimately “win” that grant. We wanted to provide you with the knowledge that grantseeking is a process that in many cases spans months—and in some cases years—of cultivation and relationship building.

In other words: grantseeking is a marathon—not a sprint.