

The Private Side of Grantmakers: Tips and Tactics

by Denise S. Schlegel, Alutiiq LLC

Ilene Mack, Senior Program Manager, William Randolph Hearst Foundation said: “The relationship between the grantee and grantor is mutual. It should be and I hope it is, more often than not, a relationship of respect and responsibility. It is our responsibility to read and review requests with an open mind, making fair judgments without being judgmental. On your part, the responsibility is to have done the research and present a thoughtfully written appeal.”

The private world of philanthropy is filled with resources for funding just about everything related to community, people, the environment, our world, and its sustainability. Sorting through the more than 88,000 foundations in the United States to find the right match for your project may seem daunting. The task of searching for a fit is not as stressful as you might think. Developing a partnership and relationship with a private grantmaker can prove to be a rewarding and fulfilling adventure.

Time is the major factor in identifying the right prospect for the purpose your organization has in mind. Foundations and other grantmakers may not be able to fulfill all of your organizational needs but can play a major role as a partner in helping your organization accomplish its goals. Never make the mistake of limiting your search for the “perfect” funder. But approach your search with the basic criteria which meet your needs and an open mind for selecting several candidates for your consideration. Match your mission with the grantmaker’s mission. You must also consider what type of support you are seeking. There are grantmakers which support general operating expenses, capacity building, or those who support projects.

Grantmakers typically fund nonprofits. For government entities, this is a good opportunity to develop traditional and non-traditional partnerships within your community. You might consider schools, community groups, senior programs, sister environmental organizations, health care providers, etc. Seek partners who represent the people you want to educate or organizations which represent sister programs within the field of environment. This partnership will lend you the nonprofit 501(c)3 IRS status needed to obtain the funding desired. Grantmakers are looking for potential grantees that demonstrate a strong relationship with their community and for that reason encourage partnering.

The Foundation Center is the premier site for beginning your research on foundations. The Center has the largest collection of training materials, research resources, publications, and the Foundation Center Directory. Anyone seeking foundation support needs to spend time at this website learning about foundations, how to approach them, and how to find them. There are cooperating collections of the Foundation Directory found at libraries across all fifty states. The listing for these locations may be found at the website under “Cooperating Collections.” The Directory provides the most complete profiles available of all 88,000 foundations. At local libraries a computer is available for your free research. All potential foundation profiles may be saved to a portable “thumb drive” for your use at home.

Once you have selected some potential funders, you will then need to dig in deeper to determine which of these potential candidates are the best candidates. Always do your **HOMEWORK, RESEARCH, and GROUNDWORK BEFORE** you ever contact a potential grantmaker! It is best to send appropriate applications to the right grantmakers than to apply the “jello on the wall” approach by sending the same concept proposal to many potential grantmakers. The later can have rather tragic results as the foundation staff can usually see through this type of campaign. And they all know when you have not done your homework. There are three basic research strategies that you can use to define and identify a funder. You can divide your search into subject matter, geographic approach, and type of support. The Foundation Directory allows the grant seeker to search by any of these categories. The cooperating libraries will also have dozens of other directories and guides for finding funds available at their grant research center.

In addition to the Foundation Directory profiles, a grant seeker needs to complete the research on a funder by looking for other sources of information to round out the prospective grantmaker’s profile. These resources are websites, annual reports, 990-PF tax returns, the foundations own guidelines and request for proposal document, newsletters, press releases, and grant lists. The Foundation Center website will provide information on how to obtain many of the documents you need to complete your research. Please keep in mind that less than 4,000 foundations have community websites. The rest of the research is completed the “old fashioned way!”

Once you have identified the right prospect, completed your research, and understand how the funder wishes to be contacted the first time, you need to prepare a concept paper in the form of a letter. This first contact is typically a “letter of interest” to the grantmaker. This letter will contain a summary of your project, identification of the target population, the cost, goals, expected outcomes, and the benefit of the funding partnership to the community. It is a “mini-presentation” of the project you wish them to fund. The grantmaker will review this letter and then contact you to either invite you to apply or to turn you down. Yes, we all get turned down at some point! Just don’t let this stop you from pursuing other potential candidates. The turn down usually does not have to do with the quality of your proposal but is more closely related to the grantmaker’s priorities for funding at that time.

The relationship that developed with the “right funder” brings many rewards to your organization and your community. There are many funders out there who would like to meet you and support the work you are doing for your community. Just like anything else worth while, it is truly worth the effort.

For more resources, training, and information please spend some well invested time with the Foundation Center website, www.foundationcenter.org. And if you ever have the opportunity to visit one of the Foundation Centers Offices you will find a lot more information and world-class support from their staff.

Best wishes for successful funding!

Denise Schlegel led the Grant Writing Training for watershed specialists and environmental educators during the PACD/SCC Joint Annual Conference in July 2008.