Communicating With Funders and Program Officers

Grantseekers are routinely advised to contact sponsors before formally proposing ideas, but most grantseekers would, in the words of proposal development specialist Michael J. Spires, "rather undergo a root canal without anesthesia than call a program officer." Although people avoid contacting program officers, pre-proposal communication helps establish a relationship with the sponsor. In addition, the program officer's immediate response to a project is a great predictor (although not guarantee) of success.

Robert Porter has outlined some valid reasons to contact a program officer:

      To confirm if a project idea fits with the sponsor's and program's objectives.
      To obtain guidance about a project's design, collaboration, budget, and timeline.
      To discover any underlying considerations, methodology trends, preferences, dislikes, and shifting priorities that do not appear in published material.

Confirming if a proposed idea fits with the program's objective is especially important. Marilyn Dickey writes that one foundation instantly rejects ~80% of proposals because they don't fit program objectives.

Logistics of Contacting a Program Officer

Identify the point of contact or program officer most suited to your project by looking online. Unless you have a simple question (but not so simple that you could have easily found it online or in the RFP), avoid cold calling the sponsor. First, send the officer or point of contact an email.

In your email exchange, you can (1) request to talk to the sponsor on the phone, writing, for example, "I would like to set up a time to discuss the programmatic relevance of my idea for a grant. I would be happy to send you a copy of my overview section in advance of the meeting." By having your overview section done and giving the program officer the opportunity to read it before you speak on the phone, you will get more out of the conversation, and it speaks to your commitment. Don't send a rough outline—make it as close to a final draft as possible. Alternatively, in the first email exchange, you can (2) ease into a request to talk to a sponsor on the phone by briefly explaining your project (your elevator pitch) and asking if your project is something the sponsor would consider. If you see encouragement or have further questions, ask the program officer if you can contact them via phone to discuss issues that were raised in their email. List your available dates and times as a courtesy to the officer's time.

Sometimes, you might encounter an unresponsive program officer, but there's almost always more than one name on the RFP for you to contact. Go to another name, and do not complain about the unresponsive one. If they refer you back to the unresponsive person, try another name. If they refer you back to the first person, then it would be appropriate to say something like, "Thank you. I have been unsuccessful in getting in touch with ___. Can you help me get in touch or advise me on how best to reach ____?" When you do get a program officer on the phone, be prepared to discuss your project in depth and have specific questions for the officer.

Follow-up with a thank you email.

Questions for a Program Officer

Questions to ask a program officer include:

      Does the proposed project match the sponsor's/program's current priorities? If it does not, ask for suggestions to alter the project or about other programs that might make a better fit.
      What can be done to improve the chances of a favorable review? The program officer probably knows this is why you are calling, so there is no reason to be shy about asking.

What are the most common reasons a proposal is rejected? This question might help you understand some of the underlying considerations of a review panel. However, sometimes they publish this information online, so look for it on the agency website first.

Are there any emerging interests within the program? Again, this can help get at some underlying considerations that do not appear in print materials.

Is the award amount expected to change compared to the previous year? What is the anticipated success ratio for the grant cycle? Be careful that these questions are not already answered online!

Quick Tips

Explain the expected outcomes of the project, again thinking of how the outcomes relate to a larger goal and the sponsor's mission.

Highlight the ways your project is unique.

Your elevator pitch should take about 30-60 seconds to say in a conversational tone. Do not use jargon. Write down what you want to say and practice until you can recite it without hesitation. Half a page of written material should be sufficient. Make different versions of your pitch depending on your audience. A good set of criteria to keep in mind can be found in Heilmeier's Catechism.

George H. Heilmeier was an American engineer who spent much of the 1970's in the United States Department of Defense, including becoming director of DARPA; was vice-president of Texas Instruments; was president and CEO of Bellcore; and was a pioneering contributor to liquid crystal displays. Heilmeier's Catechism is a set of questions credited to Heilmeier that anyone proposing a research project or product development effort should be able to answer.