

Message To a New Would-Be Grantseeker

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Wednesday, April 12, 2006 - Maryn Boess

Contributed By Maryn Boess

From: Janice Jones
Date: Mar. 30, 2006
To: Maryn Boess
Subject: About Grants

Hello, Ms. Boess. My name is Janice Jones. I am assistant to the pastor of First Light Mission. We are a new faith-based organization that would like to start a senior center, youth center, and child care center in a targeted area in Phoenix. We are just starting out and need help obtaining grant information for all areas of development. Can you please direct us where to start first. Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to read this email and respond or forward it to someone that can direct us on where to go.

From: Maryn Boess
Date: Mar. 30, 2006
To: Janice Jones
Subject: Re: About Grants

Hello, Ms. Jones, and thanks for contacting us. Congratulations on the formation of your ministry -- you have taken a very big step and you can look forward to many adventures ahead!

Your questions about where to start with grantseeking are ones I am asked to answer frequently. And my answer always begins the same way. Contrary to what you may have heard or been led to believe, securing grant dollars is *not* as easy as picking apples off a tree. The good news is, it isn't rocket science either. There are a number of key principles that apply, and key tools to help. Once you understand the key principles, and know how to use the key tools, you're on your way.

As a brand-new organization, one principle that will be important to you right off the bat is this: *Grant dollars should not be your first level of fundraising for your programs and services.*

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Think of grantmakers as investors -- because they are. Grants are not free gifts given to good people who want to do good things. Grants are investments in a specific outcome for the philanthropic dollars given. In the business world, investors typically prefer to invest in organizations that have a track record -- and that's true here as well. It's tough enough for well-established organizations to bring in grant dollars for their programs. "New kids" like your organization are best advised to not count on the dollars at this early stage, but to **lay the foundation for successful grantseeking by** instead focusing on building:

- Building relationships;
- Establishing credibility; and
- Developing knowledge of the landscape.

Building Relationships

Funders really don't like their first introduction to you to be via a proposal. It just isn't nice to ask for money from someone who's never even heard of you before!

This is the time for you to begin finding out about the major funders in your areas of interest, checking out their websites, reading their annual reports, talking to other organizations that have received grants from them -- and even calling the program officers themselves and asking for a few minutes of their time. Introduce yourself. Tell them what you're up to. Give them a few project ideas. Ask them a lot of questions. Be nice! Be friendly! Write a thank you note! Once you're ready to begin developing a proposal, call them again and let them know what you're doing. **Ask them for feedback, input, ideas.**

Even if the funder isn't one you can call up and talk to (and many aren't, because they're very small or very busy), you should at least **have some kind of name recognition in the general community before you begin submitting proposals.** Program officers who receive proposals from organizations they're not familiar with will call their colleagues and ask: "Who are these folks? Do you know them? Have you ever heard of them? Do you know anything about them?" If the answer is *No, no, and no*, everywhere they ask, the likelihood is pretty slim that they'll choose to fund your proposal over the dozens (even hundreds) of others from organizations with which they are already familiar.

How to begin generating name recognition? Here are a few ideas:

Invite the program officers to something -- no strings attached. Try hosting a community event and sending invitations to all the funders on your list. Make sure the invitations are well-done, professional and appealing. Important note: You are *not* asking them to sponsor you or to pay for anything. You're hosting a community health fair, for instance, and are simply inviting them to come visit as a guest. Don't be surprised if they don't show up -- their schedules are very very busy -- but do know that the next time you send them an invitation, or a press release, they're more likely to

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remember your organization's name -- hopefully favorably -- and you're off to a good start.

Add funders to your mailing list -- it couldn't hurt! Many people set great store by their agency newsletters and if you put together a nice newsletter and want to include funders on your mailing list, that's fine. Some funders really take the time to peruse these materials. Most that I know, however -- with the best of intentions -- set them aside (with the dozens or hundreds of others they receive regularly) and may not ever actually read through them. What's nice is when a program officer starts information files for each of the organizations that contact him or her, and simply adds your invitations, press releases, newsletters and so on to your file as they come in. When the day comes that you call for a conversation -- or actually have a proposal you'd like to submit -- they can turn to their file and "remember" who you are, even if they've not yet spoken to you in person.

Go where the funders are. In many communities there are gatherings where nonprofit reps have the opportunity to meet and listen to grantmakers talk about their programs. Here in Phoenix, the Phoenix Grants Forum serves this purpose with its quarterly breakfast meetings and grantmaker panels. The Arizona Grantmakers Forum (www.arizonagrantsforum.org) -- the membership organization for the grantmakers themselves -- hosts regular luncheons open to the community. One of Arizona's largest grantmakers, The Virginia G. Piper Charitable Trust (www.pipertrust.org), holds monthly "Piper 101" information sessions on its grantmaking priorities and practices. All of these kinds of events are great opportunities to find out more about the people behind the grantmaking scenes, meet them, introduce yourself, and continue the process of becoming a "known" entity in the community.

ALTERNATE:

Go where the funders are. In many communities there are gatherings where nonprofit reps have the opportunity to meet and listen to grantmakers talk about their programs. In some communities, this may be a local chapter of the [Association of Fundraising Professionals \(AFP\)](#) or [American Association of Grant Professionals \(AAGP\)](#) or a local grants forum. Sometimes grantmakers themselves will hold informational sessions through their membership organizations or larger local foundations. Here in Phoenix, the Phoenix Grants Forum serves this purpose with its quarterly breakfast meetings and grantmaker panels. All of these kinds of events are great opportunities to find out more about the people behind the grantmaking scenes, meet them, introduce yourself, and continue the process of becoming a "known" entity in the community.

Establishing Credibility

Small businesses typically boot-strap themselves to profitability using their own funds, moneys borrowed or gifted from friends and family, money borrowed on credit cards, etc. It isn't until the business has proven itself to be a going concern that outside

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investors are likely to be attracted to supporting it with their own dollars.

The same principle applies to a great degree in the relationship between start-up nonprofits and the philanthropic community. So if that's the case, what can you do? Again, a few thoughts:

Don't have much money? Do something anyway. Don't give the appearance of sitting around waiting for someone else's money before you begin living your mission. **Do what you can, with what you have and can get.** I don't know anyone who invests in good ideas any more. What people *do* invest in is organizations that are *doing* their mission, not just wishing they could. These are **organizations with vision, energy, and commitment -- organizations with enough faith to step out into the work 100%, without being 100% certain where the resources will come from to support it.**

Partnership pays! Back for a moment to the subject of relationships -- don't forget your relationships with other faith-based and service organizations in the community. One terrific way to become better known in the community, and to "borrow" credibility at the same time, is to connect with other, more experienced agencies and construct a collaborative program proposal. This way you're relying on someone else's reputation to give you a lift up -- not only to begin bringing funding to your own programs and services, but to bring you to the attention of the funders as well -- in a way that maximizes your positive exposure and minimizes their risk.

Look around and see **who else is doing something that intersects with the work you want to be doing.** What can you bring to the table that's unique, different, fresh? What do you have to offer the community? What do you have to offer a partnership? Collaboration is one of the very best ways to get your foot in the funding door and to establish great working relationships within the community that can last for years and create wins across the board.

Did I hear someone say "board"? Yes, you did. And here's why: **The board of a start-up nonprofit -- your governing body -- is one of the most valuable resources you can deploy in terms of creating relationships and building credibility. Each member of your governing body brings his or her own reputation to the table, and a unique set of connections, networks, and existing relationships.** These reputations and relationships are tremendous assets, and now's the time to put them to good use!

Think of yourselves as if you're on a mission, because you are: A mission to *get known and get connected in the community.* Move around well outside the neighborhood you're serving. Get your board members busy on committees or other groups where they can meet more people and talk up your organization.

Want to be really strategic? Do some digging and **find out who's on the board of trustees of the funders with whom you might want to be working.** Find out what social, professional or community networks *they're* affiliated with. Then get your board members busy looking for opportunities to connect with them at this level -- *outside*

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the grantseeker/grantmaker context. A social or collegial relationship between your board president and a foundation trustee by no means guarantees a grant. But let's face it, given the choice, most people would rather "do business" with someone they already know and trust. And nurturing collegial relationships first simply creates the opportunity to do exactly that.

Developing Knowledge of the Landscape

Finally, now is the time to be investing in some top-notch training in the how-to's of good grantsmanship. The best grants training programs will do far more than show you how to fill in the blanks on a grant application. Here's what you should be working on learning:

You'll want to understand the entire strategic process of grantsmanship -- from the beginning (what is our mission, and what grant-funded programs might grow from that mission?); through the development of a "business plan" around your program ideas; through the how-to's of funder research and relationships; and the mechanics of pulling together a winning proposal.

You'll want to learn what it takes to be truly "grant-ready" -- what structures, systems, protocols and processes should be in place to support your organization in being a good steward of the grant funds you'll be requesting.

Finally, you'll also want some training or coaching (or some good advice from a colleague who's "been there, done that") about what's involved in managing grant-funded programs -- the accounting, the reporting, the evaluation, the nature of the relationship among partners and with the funding entity.

That's it, Ms. Jones -- the best of my advice around grantseeking for the new nonprofit. Thanks for the opportunity -- I had an article that I'm scheduled to write for CharityChannel's *Grants and Foundation Review*, and I think you just helped me write it. Wishing you all the best, all blessings and every success. And -- when the time is right -- happy grantseeking