

Ensuring That Your Nonprofit is Grant-Worthy: Eight Steps to Success by Bentonne Sarah Snay

In today's challenging economic climate, more nonprofit organizations are seeking private and public grant funds to help them provide services and cover general operating expenses. As a result, obtaining grant awards has become more competitive while the amount of funds available is shrinking. So what can your organization do to maximize your chances of receiving grants? As a professional grant writer for nearly 18 years, I suggest the most important steps you can take are the following:

1. Choose funding sources whose interests and priorities are a good match with your organization's programs and clients served. If possible, call or email the funding source to gauge their interest in what you want to propose for funding. Do not try to put a square peg in a round hole.
2. Develop an annual organization budget that is "transparent" in showing from where revenues are expected to come, what expenses are expected to be covered, and that the same amount of revenues and expenses create a balanced budget. This shows fiscal soundness and good planning.
3. Your organizational budget should accurately reflect no more than 25% of total expenses for administrative and fundraising activities and that at least 75% of expenses go directly towards program services. This demonstrates that clients – not staff – are the recipients of most funds and meets generally accepted fiscal standards for nonprofits.
4. Prepare a budget narrative that clearly shows how all line items in the organization budget were calculated, based on reasonable or average costs, salaries, etc. This should be your first step in developing your organization budgets.
5. Make sure your IRS Determination Letter is no more than 18 months old as more funding sources are requiring current IRS status verification. You can request an updated letter from the IRS by calling 1-877-829-5500.
6. In most states, if you have not already done so, you need to register your organization with the state as well. In Florida, it would be with the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services. This can be done by calling 1-800-435-7352 or going online to www.800helpfla.com. Many private foundations now require proof of such registration as they are legally required to contribute only to registered nonprofits. You must register each year to stay current.
7. Establish program outcomes that measure actual changes/improvements in or for your clients or those your organization serves. These must be realistic outcomes that can be feasibly documented, preferably with objective assessment tools such as school transcripts, pay check stubs, standardized test scores, rent receipts, etc. Granting organizations are no longer satisfied with the quantity of services provided as outcomes.
8. Get your Board Members to contribute themselves and cultivate relationships with funding sources, especially private foundation trustees, directors and officers that can advocate for your organization during the decision-making process. With more nonprofits approaching the same private foundations for grants, having Board members that support your organization financially and by making connections (in addition to all of the above) is increasingly becoming an essential ingredient for success in receiving grant awards.

An effective, professional development and/or grant writing employee or consultant should share responsibility with the executive director and/or finance director for ensuring the above eight steps take place as part of your organization's standard operating procedures.

Of course, every grant proposal or application needs to confirm that the organization meets all of the individual funding source's eligibility requirements as well as priorities. It should also be clear, concise and well written. There are numerous other elements of effective grant writing but they are the subject of another article...

For further information, or to find out if Bentonne Snay can assist your organization further, email BentonneSnay@corestrategies4nonprofits.com.