Writing a successful fundraising proposal

CORE11

There are a variety of ways in which voluntary and community groups raise the funds they need to operate. One source of funding is grants, and most groups will at one time or another want to apply for grant funding. Grants are usually given by charitable trusts or from one of the grant-making arms of the National Lottery Boards. This information sheet looks at how to prepare a persuasive proposal for funding from this type of source.

For more information on the other types of funding option available to you, see our information sheet CORE10, 'Developing a fundraising strategy'.

How much money should we ask for?

Be realistic about the size of your project. A body which has never funded your organisation before is unlikely to hand over huge sums. However, don't be tempted to cut corners – funders won't be impressed by a proposal which is under-budgeted.

To help you draw up a budget for your project, see our information sheet CORE08, 'Understanding budget basics'.

Who should we approach?

Remember that anyone who gives grants does it for a reason. Every funding body is interested in achieving something different, so make sure that you approach the right people for your project. Do some research into funders to find out who supports your area of work, shares your values, and gives grants of the appropriate size. If you are unsure about whom to approach, your CVS can give advice and help you identify potential funders.

Writing your proposal

Once you've identified how much money you need, and whom to ask for it, you need to write a proposal. No matter how worthy your idea is, it won't get funded unless you present your case in a clear and organised way.

Do your homework, and always address your proposal to a named person. If you don't know who to write to, telephone and ask.

This is also true for other queries about your application. Don't pester a funder about whether they are going to fund you, but do call and check if you don't understand how to complete part of their application process. Most funders would far rather iron out any problems in advance than receive a badly completed proposal.

Most successful proposals contain several components which help the reader to understand the background to your request. Depending on the funder, you may be required to fill in a form with these fields already laid out. Or you may need to create a proposal with your own structure. Here are some headings which you may come across, or wish to use:

Executive summary

This is your chance to give a snapshot of your project, and it should be attractive enough to stand out from the pile of other proposals. Make sure you include:

- a short description of the problem
- your proposed solution
- how much money is required
- a brief description of why your organisation is the best one to carry out the proposed project.

Statement of need

In this section, you will build your case. You should present evidence that there is a need for this work to be done, and that you are capable of doing it. Include any facts, statistics or statements which support your case, but don't get bogged down in too much detail. Aim for a concise and readable style.

Here are some pointers.

- When using facts and statistics, be sure your data is accurate and up to date.

- Be positive. Give your reader hope that the problem can be solved.

- Think about how urgent your need is. If the problem is dire, say so. This may prompt potential funders to respond quickly. If it isn't, don't pretend it is. Funders will know the difference.

- Don't be shy of pointing out what's special and noteworthy about your project.

- Avoid being critical of other projects or organisations. Funders are usually interested in collaboration, not duplication or competition.

Project Description

This is where you set out exactly what you plan to do to address the need you have described. Here are some items to include:

- Objectives - these are the measurable results of your project. For example, the number of people who will take part in your woodland scheme, the number of trees you will plant, data about the effect on air quality, erosion etc.

- Outcomes - these are the non-measurable results, the changes that your project will bring about. For example, changed awareness of the woodland environment, increased health and enjoyment of your volunteers and local people.

- Methods - focus on how, when and why. Describe exactly what will happen from the time you begin your project until it is completed. Give an order and timing for the tasks you are planning. Substantiate why you think your activities will lead to success. This is especially important if you are proposing a new or unusual approach.

- Staffing/administration - who will you need to help you do this work? Staffing should include paid workers, volunteers and consultants. If staff need to be hired, explain the necessary qualifications. If you already know who you want, provide biographical information. The quality of your staff can influence the decision of whether to award funding.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Measuring the success of your efforts is an important part of the process. Include a section on how and when your work will be monitored and eventually evaluated, and how the results will be reported.

Some funders stipulate how this must be done as a condition of funding. With each funder you approach, make sure you are aware of any monitoring requirements and show how you will build these into your project from the start.

Budget

This can be a simple, one-page statement of projected expenses, or a complex spreadsheet. Either way, you need to think carefully about all of the expenses you expect to incur. Be realistic. Explain any unusual items or other sources of funding if you think the numbers will not tell the whole story.

Conclusion

Make your final appeal here. Summarise what you intend to do and why it's important. Repeat your need for funding in a sentence or two. Don't be afraid to use a little emotion to solidify your case, but don't go overboard with this.

If there are potential benefits to the funder, list them. This is particularly true for trusts which are set up by companies – these are usually looking to gain some publicity and community support through their charitable activities.

After you submit your proposal

Submitting your proposal is just the first step in getting money. It may take potential funders several weeks or even months to review your appeal for a grant.

During this time, you may be asked for additional information or references.

Be patient but persistent. If you do not hear anything for a while, don't be afraid to ask about the status of your request.

Eventually, you will hear whether you have been successful. If your request has been turned down, you can always ask for an explanation. Perhaps more information was needed. Maybe they would consider a proposal at a future date.

If you do receive the money you want, remember to thank the funder for their support. Keep in touch with them as your project progresses, and hopefully you will build an ongoing relationship.