

STANDING OUT FROM THE CROWD - How to write a successful grant application

There are many thousands of voluntary organisations competing for funds. In an increasingly competitive field you will have to work harder to stand out from the crowd. There's no magical secret to writing a successful grant application, but there are some things that you can do to improve your chances of getting funding.

Make your application clear

The first thing to remember is that funders *want* to give their money away. Your job is to make it as easy as possible for them to do this by submitting a clear application.

- CLEAR evidence that there is a need for your project
- CLEAR proof that you meet the funder's criteria
- CLEAR description of the impact that the grant will have

Target your application

Find out all you can about the funder. Never begin an application "To whom it may concern". Begging circulars rarely succeed. Make your application specific to the funder's interests, but don't merely chase the money - if your project doesn't fit with their programme this will be obvious to the funder, no matter how much you bend the facts to fit. Show how your project fits with the funder's strategy and how it will meet their desired outcomes.

Prepare

Bad applications start with the application form. Like painting & decorating, 75% is preparation. Allow plenty of time to complete all the application requirements before the submission deadline. Read all the information about your chosen funder's programmes and make sure you are applying for the most relevant one. Make sure you have the latest copy of the funder's guidance and read it thoroughly. If possible, make contact with the funder to discuss your project, before you apply, then *listen to* and *act on* any advice given. Gather evidence to put together a compelling case that proves there is a need for your project. Consult with your customers. Find out what is already available in your area and what gaps there are in provision.

Think Long Term

Show that your project is part of a coherent strategy for the development of your organisation. Show that you have taken into account future running costs i.e. that you will be able to afford to run the finished facility.

Apply

Read all the way through the application form before you begin to fill it in. Answer every question carefully and completely. Don't put "see attached" in answer to any question although in most cases it is ok to include supplementary information in *addition* to your answer. If you are applying by letter, remember to actually ask for the money - a surprising number of people forget! Don't just say "We're a nice charity, please support us in any way you can", explain exactly how much you want, what the money will buy and what long term difference this will make to you and your community. Say what you are trying to achieve in a lively way. Avoid threats such as "if you don't fund us we will have to close"; instead be positive and focus on the benefits that funding will bring.

Describe what makes you special

You know what makes your organisation special, so make sure your application communicates that clearly. Think carefully about what really makes you different, whether it's your people, your approach or the need you are tackling. Describe this, and show your energy for your organisation and for the project you are looking to fund. Describing what you want to do is easy. Describing the impact it will have on your community is harder, but getting across the impact of your project is a vital part of getting it funded.

Use facts and figures

Back up what you are saying with facts and figures that add authority to your application. Include case studies of past successes. If these are interesting, inspiring and personal they will help move you up the funder's shortlist. A good story will help them understand better what you do. Carry out customer research that demonstrates you are listening to what your community wants/needs. Draw on statistics about deprivation, health, demographics etc. that help paint a picture of the area you serve. Quality statistics can raise your application from good to great. It may also help to include profiles of yourself and the rest of the project team, to demonstrate that you have the necessary skills to deliver the project. However, don't be tempted to pack your application with reams of appendices to make it look good. Big isn't necessarily better. Include only relevant supporting material and make sure it's presented clearly (e.g. graphs, tables, graphics). Structure your submission so that it is easy to follow and include a table of contents, index, etc.

Write clearly

There is no point bringing all this information together in your application unless you describe it clearly. Take the time to edit your application so that it shows just the most important points, clearly and effectively. Think about your layout, be brief, and use headings and bullet points to help draw the funder's eye to the most important information. With most funders you'll only get one shot. Be clear and you will increase your chances.

Check

Many funders only have one member of staff to read all the applications, so they will not spend long on the first assessment. Don't make it easy to reject your request. Make sure you have included all the information that the funder has asked for e.g. accounts, budgets, quotations, plans etc. Make sure you haven't used any jargon or abbreviations that may be unfamiliar to the funder. Don't make assumptions, explain your thinking clearly. Ask someone who doesn't know your work to read your application. If they don't understand what you are planning, a funder probably won't either. Get someone to proof-read the application too, to make sure there are no silly mistakes in there. Make sure the application is signed by the right person or people - if you're asked for two signatures, one won't do and if you're asked for a trustee's signature, that is who they want.

Submit

Make sure you send your application in well before the closing date, if there is one. Make sure that you use the correct postage because no funder will want to pay to receive your application from the postman!

Wait

Now the hard work is done, the decision is with the funder and you can relax. However, it is not a good idea to go away on holiday immediately after submission, as there may be initial queries which the funder will want to raise with you on receipt of your application. Keep a full copy of your submission for your own records, so you can refer to it if necessary. Good luck!