Nine secrets to writing successful grant proposals

You have an amazing project, program or business idea. Now you need money to make it happen. However, getting the attention — and dollars — of investors, foundations, government agencies and other funders means putting together an effective proposal. Whether you're looking for a grant for your scientific research, venture capital for your startup or funding for your non-profit initiative, our nine key tips will boost your odds of success.

1. Find the right fit

Before you commit time and energy to creating a proposal, make sure it's worth pursuing. You're better off submitting just one or two well-prepared proposals with a good fit than a dozen poorly written ones that don't align with the funders' priorities.

Carefully review the eligibility criteria, application guidelines and funding limits. Do some digging to see if they've supported projects similar to yours in the past. If possible, talk to the funding coordinator ahead of time about whether your project is a strong candidate and how to shape it to maximize its appeal.

2. Carve out enough time

When we say "enough" time, we mean LOTS. Even if you have previous proposals to draw on, every funder's questions and priorities are a little different. Tailoring your material, gathering all the supporting documents and formatting everything according to the funder's guidelines is no small job. And if your project involves partners, you'll need to add extra time for their input and approvals.

Meanwhile, find out exactly when everything is due. You don't want to spend 60 hours on a proposal only to miss the deadline because your funder is in a different time zone. And don't wait until the last minute to submit. A spotty internet connection, malfunctioning computer or fussy PDF converter can spell the difference between on time and disqualified.

3. Tick their boxes

Make it easy for the reviewers to find the information they're looking for by matching the structure and wording of your proposal to the funder's guidelines and instructions.

Some applications will tell you how each section is weighted. In other cases, you can get a good sense based on the word count limit. Don't say more than you need to make your case effectively — reviewers don't want to plow through a lot of filler. However, if a question has a limit of 1,000 words, a 200-word answer probably won't be adequate.

It's helpful to copy and paste any criteria into your draft document so you can ensure your responses cover everything they've asked for. (Just remember to delete those notes before you submit your proposal!)

4. Cover the essentials

Some funding applications don't include a well-defined structure, criteria or scoring breakdowns. In other cases, you might find there's overlap between questions, ambiguous wording or no logical place for key information you want to include. Where possible, get clarifications from the funder before you submit your proposal.

In the absence of clear guidelines, remember that any strong proposal covers these basics:

- Define the problem and describe why it's important.
- Explain how you're going to address it and why you're taking that approach.
- Discuss the specific outcomes your project will create and the steps you'll take to achieve them, including timelines.
- Explain why your organization is well positioned to tackle this issue.
- Detail how you'll spend the funder's money and what other funding sources you'll draw on.

5. Emphasize return on investment

Explain how supporting your proposal will help the funder achieve their own organizational goals. Show how your project or program aligns with their priorities, reflecting their language whenever possible.

Focus on what their investment will accomplish: it's not about the new microscope, it's about the advanced cancer research the microscope will enable. Wherever possible, quantify the impact you expect to make.

Just be sure you're grounded in reality. Ambitious goals can excite funders. However, what you're proposing should be achievable. Find the "Goldilocks" level between an uninspired project and a pipe dream, and back up your vision with well-defined timelines, budgets and methods for measuring success.

6. Demonstrate credibility

Show funders you've done your homework. Lay out the facts that shaped your strategic decisions. Explain why you've chosen specific goals, the steps you've taken to date and what you'll do next to achieve your outcomes.

Be upfront about potential risks. You won't impress funders by saying that you have no competitors or that your project is guaranteed to succeed. Instead, show that you've analyzed your risks and competition and developed strategies for dealing with them.

And don't ask funders to take your word on it. Back up your statements with a carefully curated selection of proof points. These can include credible stats, expert opinions, client testimonials and external research.

Finally, give them reasons to trust you can deliver what you promise. What past successes can you point to? Who's on your team or advisory board? What expertise do they bring to the table? How much money have you already secured? Who are you partnering with?

7. Rev up readability

Often, reviewers have a giant stack of proposals to assess, so make it easy for them to read yours — even if they're just skimming. Put the most important information first. Keep your sentences and paragraphs short. If the format allows, break up dense text with bullet lists. For longer answers, use subheadings to make it easier to navigate, aligning your wording for each subhead with the different components of the question.

Write in an active voice to give your proposal more oomph, and avoid wishy-washy language. Don't tell a potential funder you *want to* empower girls in the community with an after-school program that will cost *around $200,000*. Tell them you *will* do it and it *will* cost $233,000.

8. Nail the tone

The best proposals excite potential funders without being too salesy or, conversely, begging for money. Aim to inspire funders with your vision and inspire confidence in your ability to achieve it. Consider how much reviewers know about this area and tailor your text accordingly. Provide enough specifics to be credible without getting lost in the weeds, and demonstrate you know what you're talking about while keeping jargon and acronyms to a minimum.

9. Pay attention to the pesky details

As you draft the proposal, your project ideas may evolve. Make sure every element of the final version reflects your final thinking. Double-check that your timelines, budgets or details in one answer are consistent with what you say elsewhere, and triple-check all your numbers. If possible, step away from the proposal for a day or two and come back to it with fresh eyes.

Read all the instructions carefully. Pay attention to formatting requirements like font size, number of pages and word or character count limits (and remember that character counts usually include spaces). Keep in mind that if you're submitting your proposal through an online form, elements like tables, bolding, bullets, footnotes and other formatting may get stripped out.

Finally, make sure you've collected all the additional material you need to attach, such as budgets, cash flow projections, letters of support and technical specs.

Securing funds can make or break your project. If you need help putting together a high-impact proposal, we'd love to put Cadmium Red's proven track record to work for you. Just call or email us!