



Do You Need a Proposal Writer?

If you're seeking grant money, your best bet may be to find a qualified writing consultant.

BY IRENE ZOLA

The ideal of an in-house staff that can satisfy an organization's proposal-writing needs isn't always realizable. Sometimes hiring a consultant who is a skilled communications expert is the cost-effective solution.

Why Hire a Consulting Writer?

The ability to write well is only one of many talents that proposal-writing experts offer. Before the proposal is signed and sent off in the evening mail, they will employ a surprising array of skills.

Professional writing consultants have broad experience and know what "sells" a grant to a funder. Because they have an investment in the proposal's success, and because they're

not bound by internal dynamics, they add an objectivity that is welcomed by wise decision-makers.

Expert consultants have a gift for collaboration, which is a must for successful grant-writing. They know how to work with people inside

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Tips on Working with a Consulting Writer

- 1. Allow enough time.** Hire your writer five to six weeks before foundation deadlines—and even earlier for government deadlines. Writers do their best work when there is enough "refreshing" time between writing sessions.
- 2. Use contracts.** To avoid misunderstandings, it's helpful to sign a contract with your writer, outlining work schedule and payment fees.
- 3. Hold planning meetings.** To keep things on track, meet with your writer regularly. At your first meeting, let the writer know as much as possible about the background of the assignment. Agree on a timeline, working backward from the grant deadline.
- 4. Expect revisions.** Writing is a process. Don't expect to approve of the first draft. You can usually provide valuable input toward a final piece for which your organization must take responsibility.
- 5. Be open.** Communication enhances the collaborative process. Members of your staff should understand that their accessibility to the writer, who is piecing together information, is important to the organization.



How to Choose a Consulting Writer

An expert consulting writer has five main attributes:

- 1. Writing excellence.** The first qualification is the ability to well formulate proposals and related materials.
- 2. Interpersonal skills.** The writer may need to talk with members of your staff, foundation officers, and other agencies on your behalf.
- 3. Knowledge of organizational structures.** Qualified consultants will be able to scale your organization's hierarchy without ruffling people's feathers.
- 4. Access to Internet resources.** Using the Internet may substantially cut research and writing time.
- 5. Flexibility.** Writers don't have the last word. They must be able to collaborate with an organization's decision-makers.

your organization and with members of the funding community.

They may also draw attention to fatal flaws, such as an underdeveloped budget or dearth of supporting evidence. They can help you collect convincing evidence that a program is worth a funder's investment.

In addition, expert writers are used to working quickly and jumping in at a moment's notice to meet deadlines. Because they're paid only for the time spent on an assignment, they provide a cost-effective way to enhance the fundraising process.

When Should You Hire One?

Ideally, you should hire a writer as soon as possible after you decide to prepare a proposal. To do the best job possible, proposal writers should be part of the decision-making process. The informed input that they can contribute to decisions is well worth it. They can often help crystallize decision-making by talking with key staff. They act as an external voice, helping managers reach the best decisions—especially when internal factions or hidden agendas exist.

By the time you call in the consultant, you may have already made some decisions, such as where to apply for funds. Seasoned writers will review the funder's guidelines and confirm or question your decisions. Such input is extremely valuable. Although you may choose to go ahead despite the writer's concerns, you would do well to listen closely. One of the merits of good proposal writers is their experience with funders. They know that the most important part of any proposal is to choose the right funder.

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Things to Have Ready for the Consulting Writer

To expedite the collaboration, have the following materials ready for your consulting writer:

- 1. Grant guidelines.** Note that the writer may be able to access these guidelines on the Internet.
- 2. Names & contact information about prospective funders.** If your organization has already made contact with potential funders, the writer will need to know the history of conversations and whom to contact.
- 3. Materials about your organization.** The writer will need to know your mission, history, accomplishments (including anecdotes if possible), and affiliations.
- 4. Literature about the project.** The writer will need as much information as possible about the grant-writing project. Any written information will be helpful, including the project's history, goals, design, outcomes, timeline, budget, and evaluation methods.
- 5. Names & contact information about program directors.** The writer often needs the names, telephone numbers, and e-mail addresses of program directors. Any other pertinent information about the directors' involvement will be helpful.



CREATIVE FUNDRAISING IDEAS

Raise Funds by Selling Books on Line

Through a new Internet initiative, you can raise funds by joining the Book Benefits Network and helping Barnes & Noble sell books. Once you join the Network, you can create a Barnes & Noble bookstore on your Web site and receive commissions of up to 7 percent on every title sold. You may also connect with other Web sites that want to donate ad space to nonprofits for online public service announcements. To join the Book Benefits Network, call 212-352-3630, e-mail affiliate@barnesandnoble.com, or visit barnesandnoble.com on the World Wide Web.

Remember the Three-Letter Word

The most powerful word in the English language has only three letters. No, it's not S-E-X. It's Y-O-U. It's the most irresistible of all words because it engages the imagination of the listener. Skillful use of the word "you" makes your listeners or readers participants in your fundraising pitch. It shows them how *their* lives will change when they support you. For details on this and other ideas for "turning words into magic," see *The Wizard of Ads*, a collection of short essays by Roy Hollister Williams (Bard Press, 1515 Capital of Texas Highway S., Suite 205, Austin, Texas 78746).

Hold a Thankathon

Even better than a phonathon, the thankathon gives volunteers a chance to interact with donors in conversations not driven by asking for money. Donors are surprised and gratified to get a call simply thanking them for their gifts. More than one thankathon has been followed by additional unsolicited gifts from donors who were touched by the outreach. And more than one estate donor has been identified through a thankathon. Best of all, thankathons forge relationships, which are the key to long-term support. For more details, see *Beyond Fundraising* (to order, see page 25).

Consultants act as a valuable "external voice."

How Should You Prepare?

To gain all these benefits, it's important to treat the consulting writer as part of your organizational team. The writer must have the freedom to talk to key people and offer suggestions without encountering hostility or defensiveness.

Before bringing in the writer, talk with your staff and board members. Explain what the benefits will be, and

urge them to offer their support. Put together a packet of materials about your organization and the writing project (see "Things to Have Ready for the Consulting Writer" on page 16).

Finally, be sure everyone understands that the consulting writer isn't solely responsible for the proposal's substance or style. When key people read the writer's draft, their ideas or even stylistic preferences may override the writer's decisions. The final proposal will represent a collaborative effort. ■

Selected References

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Nonprofit Sector: A Strategic Approach to the Challenges of Growth and Staffing," *Nonprofit World*, September-October 1997.

These publications are available through the Society for Nonprofit Organizations' Resource Center. For ordering information, see the Society's *Resource Center Catalog*, included in this issue, or contact the Society at 6314 Odana Road, Suite 1, Madison, Wisconsin 53719 (800-424-7367).

As a consulting writer for over 15 years, Irene Zola of New Leaves has offered outstanding writing services to national and local organizations in the New York City area, with a specialty in fundraising. In 1975, she earned a B.A. degree at Hunter College, graduating summa cum laude and with honors in political science; in 1987, she earned an M.A. degree in economics at the New School for Social Research. In addition to her consulting work, Ms. Zola has taught college writing courses since 1981 and is currently teaching at John Jay College of Criminal Justice. She can be reached at New Leaves, 545 West 111th Street, 3B, New York, N.Y. 10025 (212-531-4760; e-mail newleaves@worldnet.att.net).

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