



The New Work of Foundations: How You Can Benefit



Patrick Gaston



Steve Gunderson

What's the best way to make use of the latest foundation trends?

A Conversation With Foundation Leaders Points Up Some Answers.

Recently *Nonprofit World* spoke to several foundation leaders to get a sense of what's on their minds. Our ad hoc group included **Patrick Gaston**, president of Verizon Foundation (www.verizon.com) and **Steve Gunderson**, CEO of the Council on Foundations (www.cof.org). Here's what they had to say.

■ What are some of the newest ideas and most innovative practices in the foundation community today? How can nonprofits take advantage of them?

Gaston: It's really the idea of using technology. That may seem like a trite or convenient answer, but consider that today more than 90% of nonprofits are online yet many of them are missing out on the capacity and the benefits of the most cutting-edge technology. I know cost is always a consideration for nonprofits, but there are organizations like TechSoup Stock (which recently became a contributing partner for the Verizon Foundation Resource Center, managing the in-kind component of the Resource Center) that are putting technology in the hands of nonprofits every day. For the Verizon Foundation, for example, it's about applying technology to address critical issues such as education, literacy, and domestic violence.

Gunderson: One key challenge facing these partnerships is promoting responsible stewardship by developing the highest standards of ethical conduct. Charities, foundations, and the field of philanthropy as a whole will increasingly be measured by ethics and effectiveness. Strengthening the ethical framework in which a nonprofit operates will help gain the trust of foundations and, more important, the community the nonprofit serves. We also must put vastly more emphasis on proving results, demonstrating outcomes, and promoting performance, especially if we want to be seen as organizations of merit and worth.

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■ What's the best thing a nonprofit can do to gain more foundation support?

Gaston: One of the most important things a nonprofit can do is to have a clear strategic focus supported by effective grant-writing skills. Many very worthy nonprofits have good, solid programs but don't present them clearly and concisely. Grant writing can make or break a program. It's about capturing the key focal points that leverage a nonprofit's core competencies and align with the funding organization's target funding area.

■ How can nonprofits do more with less, as they're being forced to do today?

Gaston: The changes nonprofits are being forced to undergo are no different from those that have shaped the business world over the last couple of decades. It's about becoming increasingly efficient and taking advantage of the resources that are available to them at no or little cost, whether it's a pool of volunteers or a suite of online training tools like those offered through the Verizon Foundation Resource Center.

■ What are the long-term goals of Verizon Foundation and the Verizon Foundation Resource Center? What will success look like?

Gaston: From the perspective of the Verizon
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CREATIVE FUNDRAISING IDEAS

Keep It Conversational

When writing your grant proposal, try an informal, we're-all-in-this-together tone. Think of the reader as an interested friend. Avoid jargon and fancy language. Write the way you speak. Try talking into a tape recorder, then transcribe and edit your words. Or ask a friend to write down your words as you speak. If you can talk, you can write. Have someone outside your organization read the proposal before you submit it. Even if it's clear to you, it may be hard for someone outside your organization to understand.

Tell a Story

Begin your grant proposal with a story. This might be the story of how your organization got started, of someone you helped, or of someone who's in trouble and needs the kind of services you provide. Use an informal style and strong action words that make your mission personal and tangible. For details on this and other grantwriting ideas, see *Grassroot Grants* (Jossey-Bass, www.josseybass.com).

Make It Easy and Fun to Read

When laying out your grant proposal, keep these guidelines in mind: The less type on the page, the easier it is to read. The less clutter on the page, the easier it is to understand. Leave lots of white space, use 12-point (or larger) type, and use running heads as well as page numbers. Break up the page with bullets, bolded words, lists, indented paragraphs, and graphics. Don't "justify" your righthand margin; keep it jagged.

Foundation, I believe you'll see us focus on two key resources to benefit nonprofits: technology and human capital. We're a communications leader at the dawn of the broadband era, so we'll continue to explore ways to support nonprofits through technology. In terms of human capital, Verizon volunteers will continue to work in the community to help nonprofits implement technology that supports their efforts.

In regard to the Verizon Foundation Resource Center, the long-term goal is to increase the benefit that nonprofits can draw from the site (<http://foundation.verizon.com/resourcecenter>). By focusing on that goal, we're doing our part to ensure the hundreds of organizations that visit the site each year can expand and build upon their good work in communities across the country.

■ Verizon Foundation's approach seems to be to partner with nonprofits to bring resources to a central location rather than creating resources itself. What are the advantages of this approach?

Gaston: Particularly when talking about the Verizon Foundation Resource Center, we made the strategic decision to design a centralized approach, because it's important to make it easy for nonprofits to find what they need in one convenient location. We approached it very much the same way our business managers would when they're considering how to get a product

out to their customers. By partnering with ePhilanthropy, NPower, the Volunteer Consulting Group, the Society for Nonprofit Organizations, the Foundation Center, and TechSoup Stock, we were able to move this project along expeditiously while ensuring that nonprofits would have at their disposal an eclectic range of products, services, and development resources across a spectrum of disciplines (planning, evaluation, fundraising, recruitment, technology, communication). In short, whether it's a retail customer or a nonprofit, it's about delivering a richer, broader, deeper experience.

■ This is an era of outcome measurement. What long-term positive changes does Verizon Foundation look to create with its work and approach?

Gaston: The Verizon Foundation is focused on educating people, raising awareness of domestic violence and supporting its prevention, and using technology to deliver 21st-century health care. As a funding entity, we're looking to increase our support and partnership with organizations that can demonstrate their impact in those funding areas. More and more, you'll see the Verizon Foundation — and, I'm sure, funding organizations like it — continue this more businesslike approach of investing their money with not just a return in mind but a need to see detailed results. In our case, the return on investment has to be demonstrated by delivering more literate communities, more effective classrooms, safer communities, and more efficient delivery of health care.

■ How can nonprofits become more innovative and cutting-edge?

Gaston: By reading up on the latest developments in technology. Usually what works in business or education can be equally useful for nonprofits, so it's just a matter of keeping your eyes and mind open. Once the "aha moment" strikes and a nonprofit realizes how it can make use of an innovation, new product, or service, then it's time to reach out for support.

■ What's the most helpful advice you can give to a nonprofit organization?

Gaston: I think this goes back to the first question, but given today's increasingly competitive environment it's important to emphasize. More than 90% of all grant requests submitted to corporate foundations are denied. That's a lot of time for both the writer and reviewer. As a nonprofit, you have to understand the funder you're reaching out to and demonstrate the connection between your goals and theirs. Quite simply, it's about researching prospective funding organizations and then clearly laying out your plan to secure their support.

■ What can nonprofit leaders do to forge better communication ties with foundation leaders?

Gunderson: First, they must communicate openness,

and this goes for foundation leaders as well. We all need to do a better job of communicating who we are, what we do, and how we do it. We must convey our contributions to society. We need to be seen not just as exemplary models of accountability but also as a force for positive change.

Gaston: The key word here is measurement. Nonprofits need to communicate the impact of their programs. That kind of detail and insight is likely to get the attention of foundation leaders and will lead to a productive exchange. As the head of a funding organization, I'm very mindful that our money is being used responsibly and that we can see a return on our investments. I look for programs that can demonstrate results, which is where philanthropy is headed today. ■

Resources

Hutchinson, Bill & Ann Otter, "Straight Talk from Foundations and Corporations," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 3, No. 5.

Remley, Dirk, "Two Keys to Successful Grant Proposals," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 15, No. 3.

Vartorella, William, "Focusing on Foundation Grants: The Powerful Reverse Needs Assessment," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 12, No. 4.

These resources are available at www.snpo.org/members.




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