

Seven Reasons Why Grant Proposals Fail to Get Funded

If you've been turned down for a grant, here's what you need to know.

By Gina Wilson Beckles

Many organizations try to secure funding for their callings, ideas, and visions, but only a relative few are funded. If you've spent time and energy writing a proposal, only to be turned down, it's important to understand why.

Here's what might have gone wrong:

1. YOU DIDN'T FOLLOW THE GUIDELINES.

Funders expect you to be scrupulous in adhering to their guidelines. They expect you to meet all eligibility requirements. They expect you to have adequate support personnel to operationalize the plans as set forth in your proposal. Most important, before they even open a proposal, they expect it to be submitted on time!

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Top Grant-Writing Tips

Carefully review the “eligibility” section of all Requests for Proposals (RFPs). Don't waste valuable time pursuing grants you're not eligible for. If a grant sounds like a good fit but you don't meet all the requirements, consider partnering with another organization that better fits the criteria.

Be very cognizant of what grantors are looking for. Follow their solicitations meticulously.

Read over your final proposal several times, and pay close attention to all relevant details. Read it as if you're hearing your ideas for the first time. It's your job to present your thoughts in a clear, concise, logical way. This will ensure that you and the grantor are absolutely clear about the expectations that you have for each other.

If you don't get the grant, ask why. The feedback you get from the funder can be invaluable as you continue your search for grant money.

2. YOUR PROPOSAL IS TOO VAGUE.

It's possible that your proposal doesn't clearly outline the specifics that the funder is looking for. Here are some of the things you must be sure to specify:

- **your target population**
- **details of the activities that will take place**
- **exactly how and where service recipients will be served.**

3. THE FOCUS OF THE PROPOSAL MAY BE TOO NARROW.

The population you're targeting may not be large enough. The grantor may feel the services you're proposing aren't widespread enough to make a significant, measurable impact. In other words, your plan doesn't touch enough lives to make a real difference.

4. THE PROPOSAL MAY BE TOO BROAD.

Yes, we would all like to change the world by eliminating societal ills such as hunger and poverty. However, such goals are too unrealistic to be practical. Your proposed goals must be achievable, reachable, doable, and measurable.

5. YOUR ORGANIZATION DOESN'T HAVE A SIGNIFICANT ENOUGH TRACK RECORD TO BE CONSIDERED CREDIBLE.

Even if your organization is new, you need to make an effort to establish credibility before a grantor is likely to fund you. If your organization isn't well known, take the initiative to overcome this weakness by partnering with other established, reputable organizations.

Remember that you're asking an agency or foundation to hand over thousands or possibly millions of dollars. They want to know that their funds are being distributed to credible, worthy organizations that take their fiduciary responsibilities seriously and operate with high levels of integrity. They need to be sure you have the necessary knowledge, skills, and experience to accomplish the goals stated in your proposal. They want to know they're going to get what they pay for!

6. YOU HAVEN'T PRESENTED A CLEAR EVALUATION PLAN.

It's all about accountability. Ask yourself:


- **How are you going to show** that you did or didn't accomplish the goals you stated in your proposal?
- **What kind of measures** are you going to use?
- **Will these measures be generated and presented** by an internal or external evaluator?

Grantors want to know that you have systems in place to accurately measure what you accomplish.

7. THERE MAY BE CIRCUMSTANCES BEYOND YOUR CONTROL THAT PREVENT YOU FROM RECEIVING THE GRANT.

These circumstances, for example, might include the following:

- **Budget cuts require the funding agency to withdraw or scale back the grant.**
- **The funder changes its focus or priorities.**

Your proposal can be the best one ever prepared in the history of time and still not get funded. So don't give up. If you're willing to put in the time and effort, pursuing grants can be a wonderful opportunity. 

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Be One of the Lucky Few

Winning a grant isn't really a matter of luck but of careful attention, persistence, and continual learning. Use these resources from the Society for Nonprofits' Library at www.NonprofitWorld.org/members to gain further insight into the grant-writing process.

How to Answer the Dreaded Grant Question about Future Funding (Vol. 31, No. 1)

Seven Deadly Grantwriting Sins (Vol. 27, No. 6)

Nonprofits & Funders: Two Sides of the Same Coin? (Vol. 24, No. 4)

Two Keys to Successful Grant Proposals (Vol. 15, No. 3)

How Much? Five Factors to Consider When Choosing a Grant Request Size (Vol. 31, No. 2)

Also see Learning Institute programs on-line: Resource Development and O for Opportunity: Exploring New Revenue Opportunities for Nonprofits (www.NonprofitWorld.org/LearningInstitute).

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creative fundraising ideas

Hold a Bucket Raffle

Place prizes on a table so people can look closely at each item. Put a bucket near each prize. After buying raffle tickets, participants can put their tickets into the buckets corresponding to items they want to win. Thus, each bucket becomes its own raffle.

People love bucket raffles because of the interaction between them and the raffle itself. You can sell the tickets in bulk at low prices (around a dollar each), thus encouraging people to buy a large number of tickets. Let people use as many tickets as they want to increase their odds of winning prizes.

Sell Something Useful

Never gather a group together without offering items for sale, advises Rudolph Rosen in *Money for the Cause: A Complete Guide to Event Fundraising* (Texas A & M University Press, tamupress.com). You're missing a great opportunity if you don't have something to sell.

While you can't operate like a for-profit company, it's perfectly acceptable to sell items to help market your organization. Examples include T-shirts, hats, coffee mugs, tote bags, umbrellas, welcome mats, and pens. Emblazen the items with your organization's name and logo. That way, whenever people use them, they'll be advertising your cause.

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