

What to Do If Your Grant Isn't Approved

Don't despair. It could be the first step to a better future.

By Valerie J. Mann

So, your grant application was turned down, and you wonder why? Here are some possible reasons:

- **The grant proposal** is poorly written.
- **The project is a poor fit** with the funder's need and won't do enough to alleviate that need.
- **The proposed activities** of your project aren't clearly thought out and don't seem feasible.
- **The competition from other applications** is overwhelming.
- **The application is good and the need is great, but other projects** will serve even needier populations.
- **The funding agency isn't confident that your organization has the capacity** to successfully carry out the project.
- **Your organization has had problems** in administering other grants.

Get Debriefed.

When your proposal is rejected, it's hard to know which of the reasons listed above is the culprit. Your first goal is to get to the real root of the rejection. The best way is to request a debriefing from the funding agency or foundation.

A debriefing is a discussion with the funder about why your application wasn't funded. Most funders will be happy to discuss the reasons for rejection. Helping organizations build their capacity is an important part of their job.

Foundations aren't as likely as other funders to give debriefings. Still, it never hurts to ask for one.

Some of the advice you may receive in a debriefing:

- **You need to provide more detail** in the application.
- **A required component of the application** is missing.
- **Not enough matching funds** are being provided.
- **The grant writer didn't follow program regulations and guidelines** in developing the application.
- **Required documentation** wasn't submitted.

Listen to the debriefing with a bit of caution. Feedback is sometimes given by staff members who didn't actually review the grant or assign points to the application. When that's the case, something can get lost in the translation.

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Overall, however, it's an excellent idea to request a debriefing. You can gain information that will be invaluable for you in developing the proposal for re-submittal or for submittal to a different funder.

It's important to take to heart the information you receive in a debriefing and attempt to remedy the problems identified. Change the application or the project's structure if advised to do so and if you feel it can be done without compromising your good intentions.

Understand Success Ratios and How They Vary.

Success ratios vary widely from program to program and agency to agency. One example of a program that funds as many applications as possible is the Community Facilities program administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. This program provides funds for capital and equipment costs for essential services such as healthcare and law enforcement. These applications are accepted on a continuous basis throughout the year. Some grant requests may have to wait until the following program year, but in general, the agency is able to fund at least part of the request for many of the applications.

Some state-funded programs likewise fund as many applications as possible, but at a lower level than the amount requested. An example would be a state agency charged with dispensing both federal and state funds for law enforcement purposes. Probably at least 50% of the applications get funded.

National competitions tend to be more competitive than state-funded programs. Opening the field wider naturally decreases the success ratio. This is therefore a very important part of the equation.

Most governmental agencies publish a list of projects they've funded as well as the amount of funding awarded. Look these over. Also, ask your peers to share their grant-seeking experiences. Over time, you'll begin to have a feel for the success ratios of various funders.

This concern is more pressing if you're paying a significant amount of money to a consultant to write grant applications. It's the consultant's responsibility to fully inform you of the chances of being funded so that you can decide whether it's worth the time and money involved.

When Should You Reapply to the Same Funder?

The quick answer is to check whether the funder allows re-submissions at a later date or imposes a minimum amount of time before the application can be re-submitted. There's rarely a

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complete prohibition on re-submitting a particular project. Many foundations won't allow successful applicants to apply for another project until a period of one to three years has passed. This is to allow other organizations a chance to get funded.

Most governmental agencies don't impose any limitation on re-submissions. The rule here is to re-apply if, after talking to the funder, your project appears to be worthy and meets all basic threshold requirements.

When Should You Find Other Potential Sources?

It's not productive to put all your faith in one funding agency or foundation. The odds of getting funded are much greater if you develop multiple sources. Many programs only invite applications once a year. If you stick with one source, it could be two or three years, if at all, before you receive funding. That would delay the good work you could accomplish with your project.

You needn't wait through several rounds of a competition for one funder before applying to another source. Most of the time, two or three funding programs can be identified to fund a particular project, all of them equally promising.

It's important to maintain a "can-do" attitude. Put the rejection in perspective. Don't become overly identified with the results of one application. Preserve your sense of balance, and keep looking for other sources that may spell success. 

Valerie J. Mann (vjmamm@comcast.net, best-grant-writing-workshop.com) is author of Getting Your Share of the Pie: A Complete Guide to Finding Grants (Praeger Publishing). She gives grant-writing seminars throughout the U.S. and is a regular contributor to the blog of GrantCentral USA.

Your Share of the Pie

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Susan J. Ellis, president, Energize, Inc.

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Susan J. Ellis is president of Energize, Inc., an international training, consulting, and publishing firm that specializes in volunteerism. Since founding the Philadelphia-based company in 1977, she has helped clients throughout the world strengthen their volunteer corps.

Susan is the author or co-author of 12 books. Recently released is *The Last Virtual Volunteering Guidebook*, revising the classic work she and Jayne Cravens wrote more than a decade ago.

Energize's Web site (energizeinc.com) has won international recognition as a premier resource for leaders of volunteers. Susan is publishing editor of the field's first international online journal, *e-Volunteerism: The Electronic Journal of the Volunteer Community* (e-volunteerism.com) and serves as the dean of faculty for *Everyone Ready*®, online volunteer management training (everyoneready.info).

Susan says: I've been reading **NONPROFIT WORLD** almost since its first issue in 1984. It continues to be one of the best publications around for organization leaders. Why? Because it's written for the thoughtful practitioner and presented in a welcoming magazine format.

I'd describe the articles as pithy—offering worthwhile information on vital subjects, at just the right length. I also like the variety of topics.

I get bored with journals that always circle back to fundraising as their core interest, when managing a not-for-profit is so multi-dimensional. **NONPROFIT WORLD** includes revenue generation, but also covers human resources (including volunteer management—very important to me!), marketing and social media, risk and liability, leadership tips, and more.

The authors are diverse, but it's a plus having had the same editor since **NONPROFIT WORLD** was founded over 30 years ago. Jill Muehrcke guides the magazine with a keen eye, consistently identifying trends and issues and finding the right experts to discuss them. I especially appreciate her frequent checklists and practical sidebars. 