Even in challenging times, there are still many grants available to nonprofits. The problem is you’re a little fish is a BIG pond! Competition is fierce and unless you can be creative, and set yourself apart from everyone else, your application won’t stand a chance. Look in your community. Is someone else doing a similar program? Talk to them about forming a partnership. Many funders are looking for collaborations as a means to discourage duplication of services. The goal is to have a clear and concise plan for your program or project. There is too much competition for you to think funding is guaranteed.

Why Look for Funding?
It is important to support your mission through fundraising and grant writing. What does a community relations approach to grant proposal writing really mean? I recommend that if you’re not experienced in going after big, national grants that you look right in your community. Don’t get caught unprepared—do your research. Start with a warm and fuzzy approach. Call your local funders first and talk to them about your program or project before sending them anything in writing. This may create interest in your program and also help in finding alternative funding.

Your team is responsible for maintaining community relations and initiating and building relationships with local businesses, volun-

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It is important to note that your team does not consist of just your development director or your grant proposal writer. Your team consists of the CEO/ED, CFO/CPA, development staff, Board of Directors and a group of employees from managers to administrative staff. One person alone cannot attend all the functions and meetings in your community, but if relevant employees are given the opportunity to represent your office, it will show the commitment you have to bringing needed programs and services to the community you serve. It will also create loyalty throughout your business.

Who Will Do the Work?
Just because you have development staff doesn’t mean you have an experienced grant proposal writer on staff. If your organization can afford to hire a professional, do it! Ask around - you’ll be surprised at how affordable it can be, and in the long run it will save you money. Grant proposals are detail oriented and can be tedious. They take time. If you have someone from your development staff write your organization’s grant proposals, do not have them do it when they should be concentrating on the Annual Fund or the big fundraiser that is coming up. You need people who can research, write, organize, plan, budget, monitor and calculate statistics and complete reporting—all following strict guidelines and on a deadline.

Where Do I Start?
Once you know who will be writing your grant proposal, I suggest developing a grant writing plan just as you would a marketing or development plan. Include what program or project for which you would like to find funding, the approximate amount of funding needed to support the program, the time frame and any other information you deem important when looking for funders. Having this wish list available will help guide you as you look at potential funders and their guidelines. Almost all grants require the same information. To expedite the process, put together the following material so as to make the time you spend on proposals not wasted:

- A one page background on your agency’s history
- A one page explanation of the program and/or project you are looking to fund
- Your agency/organization’s:
  - Mission & Vision
  - 501 c 3 IRS Tax Status letter
  - Date of Incorporation
  - Federal Tax Id number
  - Recent financial statements
  - Most recent audit
  - Current list of Board of Directors
  - Success stories to support your program
  - Any letters of collaboration

Most importantly, research first then work with your staff to interpret each funder’s guidelines. Then you will be prepared and organized to gather the material and information necessary for a strong proposal.

What Grants Are Available?
There are different types of grants; federal, State, community foundations, United Way, corporate funders and private/family foundations. Look at the Community Relations pages of vendors and businesses in your area. Many fund community programs. Be careful with federal grants. They have more requirements and restrictions, and can be challenging and costly to manage because you must adhere to federal regulations. Foundation grants can have specific geographic limitations and support only local needs. Private/family foundations are endowed by individuals or families and are family-directed (hands-on) and usually fund trendy causes. They have their own requirements.

Research your funders. Know their history, interests and what they have funded in the past. Take a look at their 990’s. It’s free to join Guidestar, so you should set up an account. Don’t rein-
vent the wheel. Take a look at Annual Reports from similar agency’s to see who is funding them. Depending on the size of your organization, it’s not always beneficial to subscribe to grant sites that charge a subscription. There are free sites that can help you get started. Grantwatch.com has funding opportunities for nonprofits in Connecticut. They have a basic, free account that will get you started. Check with your local library, they usually have memberships in some of the bigger directories, one being the Foundation Center. You can subscribe to the Foundation Center for as little as $200 a year, depending on what your needs are.

How to Proceed

Your proposal should be neat, clean and easy to read! Make it brief. Be positive, avoid unsupported assumptions and follow the guidelines. If they say they only want a two page narrative, do not give them three pages with two attachments. Your problem statement should answer “who-what-when-where-how.” Pay special attention to your outcomes—these are the benefits to your clients. Make sure you can substantiate all information. Have your CFO or a CPA assist with the program budget. Direct costs generally include program associated salary wages and fringe benefits. Any consultant fees should also be listed. Indirect costs should include the general cost of doing business that is not related to a specific program, for example: administrative overhead, marketing, publicity and fundraising.

One Last Thing

I’m sure it goes without saying, but communicate with your funder. A good and successful relationship requires appropriate attention and common courtesy. Comply with a funder’s requirements. Send “thank you” notes and regular updates, recognize the funder and credit them in all program announcements, newsletters, special events, etc. Provide reports in a timely manner and be prompt to respond to information requests.

Remember, what works for one agency may not work for you. Every organization is different. This information should give you an idea of what you need to move forward. It isn’t difficult to write a grant but it does require some creative writing skills, organization and a commitment from your agency to provide the service, as written in your grant proposal, to the community.

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