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## THE CENTER FOR CREATIVE RESOURCES

### **FOUNDATION SUPPORT, PART TWO: ...THEN, MAYBE, THE PROPOSAL**

By Will Maitland Weiss

Foundations! Great! Exist to give you money!

Foundations! Frustrating! Seem to be giving their money to anyone/everyone else!

Let's imagine you have got your foot in the door: that you sent a **LETTER OF INQUIRY** and (eventually!) got a call or an e-mail or a letter inviting you to submit a proposal. You are still going to go on inviting them to performances/workshops/classes/events/whatever—depending upon your schedule of stuff, throughout this process. You are also, if possible, going to request a meeting in which you can discuss with a grants officer—face-to-face—what they are looking for in greater detail, any advice they may have on your project, and any advice they may have on **OTHER** sources of support. Either you will get this meeting or you won't. In either case, you will be crafting your **PROPOSAL**.

If the ABC Foundation requests that you use their application form, fine, do so. If they do *not* make you fit the proposal into their own little box(es) and you are on your own, **CCR** recognizes that 100 different development consultants will give you at least 85 or 90 different recommendations for format and content. There is not a single, Right Way. This is ours.

- **THE COVER LETTER.** Try to establish personal contact. "So-and-so suggested I reach out to the ABC Foundation..." "As I mentioned, when we ran into each other in that bar in The Village..." Best, of course: "Following up upon our meeting/as you suggested during our conversation..." Then you have one paragraph in which to grab their attention (how are you going to positively effect the world, what is the challenge you are facing, what difference can their grant make)—and where possible, give it a human face. Then you have one paragraph to spell out the ask (attached-is-a-proposal-which-requests-\$XX,XXX, to be paid by such-and-such date or in this fiscal year or whenever, for general operating/project/ whatever support...). Then how you will stay in touch (never assume they will contact you, but do provide your phone and e-; always promise to contact them, when/how). You can invite them to yet some additional cultivation/performance/site visit opportunity here. And you close by thanking them. Copy-cite the letter to someone who provided a contact, if

there is someone. Don't copy-cite it to everyone else on your staff (even if you give them copies); the Foundation doesn't care, they *assume* everyone on the staff knows about this.

- **THE COVER PAGE.** Some do, some don't; suit yourself. It spells out the facts; one hopes it is kept/used by the Foundation giving officer's assistant. [See *sample*.]
- **REQUEST.** They want to know for what you are seeking support and how much. If they can't find this clearly and immediately, assume they will be in an increasingly foul mood as they slog through your proposal. If they bother at all. (Also: assume that the cover letter and proposal have gotten separated, or are being read at separate times.) "We do this/are this/thank you for having supported this in the past. Now we request that the ABC Foundation consider a grant in the amount of \$XX,XXX to support this or that and that."
- **ANTICIPATED RESULT (DIFFERENCE TO BE MADE).** Remember: no one will give you a penny because-you-need-money. They will give because what you do with that penny is transformative, glorious, and necessary. Wave the flag. Let the chorus and orchestra ring out at top volume here.
- **WHY YOU.** And make it clear why this wonderful thing(s) will happen with their money... but only if they give it YOU. How your organization is unique. How your organization is ideally suited, positioned, prepared to undertake this accomplishment. How your organization will particularly succeed because of (a) who is involved, (b) what other resources (maybe other grants? people? experience?) are committed.
- **MORE DETAIL OF WHAT/WHEN/WHERE.** Back down to earth. Now spell out what is going to happen, along what anticipated timeline. The more detail the better—and Foundation's have no problem with the fact that some of these detail will assuredly change.
- **EVALUATION.** How will you measure success? Quantitative evaluation is (relatively) easy: how many bodies, how many iterations. "More" is not the only right answer (e.g., you can impress upon the Foundation that you are going to serve 100 kids with in-depth education programming, rather than 1,000 kids through ephemeral "exposure"). But it is usually the right answer. "We-will-expand-our-audience-served-from-XX-to-YYY..." Then there's the hard part: qualitative. Are there questionnaires or focus groups for feedback? An objective, third-party evaluator (which can include the glowing review in the *Times*... but it's risky to count on that in your advance proposal!)? Can you come up with ways to measure both "artistic" success and "management" success?

- **WHAT'S IN IT FOR THEM.** If you were proposing to the ABC Corporation, this would be longer, sooner, even more important. But Foundations care about their own benefits, too (some less, some more). Right, they aren't going to want you spending \$5,000 of their \$10,000 grant on lavish thank-you dinners and the brass plaque; but they do want to know what sort of access (tickets, invitations, etc.) they will get to the company/the project and what kind of recognition they will get (advertising, press releases, direct mail, signage, at-the-theatre, in the programs, etc.). Anything else special (they can always decline it, but appreciate being asked)? And will there be exclusivity—are they the only donor, the only one at this level, the lead sponsor, etc., etc. Beware: sometimes they may want an exclusive and/or leadership position, other times decidedly not. You only know if you already asked.
- **FINANCIAL HOO-HAH.** How much is the project going to cost (why? details—even though you are also going to attach a budget page)? For how much of that are you asking them to pay? How are you getting the rest (“Don’t know” *not* an acceptable answer here!)? How does this fit into the annual operating budget as a whole; how much of that income comes from what sources? If you can, indicate recent fiscal responsibility (e.g., balanced budgets, modest surpluses, productive solutions to past shortfalls). Context: last fiscal year, this year, next year... how this fits into future, multi-year plans for growth and stability.
- **COMPELLING SUMMARY.** Remind them again why this is a great opportunity—*for them*.

Oh look! This is a lot like the contents of your letter of inquiry. But (a) you wrote that months ago and now you have fresh, new, exciting ideas, details; and (b) you get to go on a little—a little—longer in this format. Unless they stipulate otherwise, five pages is OK, four pages is better. But you also get to do more attachments: video? audio? CD (invest in 21<sup>st</sup> century tech; if it takes an effort for them to play it, they won't)? always 501(c)(3) status verification; always audited financial statements and/or federal tax form 990; budget (project and whole year of operations; for the last fiscal year, the current fiscal year, and the next fiscal year); board list (with affiliations); key staff/creative bios; list of other major institutional donors (they benchmark off of their peers; yes, they want to know how much); two or three glowing pieces of objective praise (reviews; letters + drawings from kindergarteners; blessings from established artists in your field who think that you are a genius); two or three glowing, four-color print pieces (annual report, season brochure, the study guide, program materials, marketing campaign materials, etc.).

One inch margins or greater; 12 point font. Embedding a quotation or two, or a little color, or a graphic... these are all Good Ideas if you've got 'em, because you are breaking up the grinding monotony for the program officer who, before picking up

your proposal, has just read a dozen others (and after putting yours down, still has a stack to the ceiling). If they want seven copies of this and two of that, don't ask, just do it. If they want recycled paper and no staples and soy-based ink (we kid you not!), just do it. Wherever and however they want it sent, just do it. If they have a deadline, assume it is life or death: if it says "must be postmarked by May 15" and you have it ready at 12:01am on May 16, don't send it. Wait for their next cycle.

**CCR** recommends that whatever you have written and enclosed, you have Someone Else read over every word and look at every insert. There is at least one major, major supporter of the performing arts which famously discards proposals in which their (easily misspelled) name is misspelled. Spell Check is never adequate. And you can't risk that the *Times* review you enclosed is missing the second page, or that pages six and seven of your audited financials photocopied in a blur. This is likely your one-and-only shot until at least year from now. Make it your best shot.

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