



THE CENTER FOR CREATIVE RESOURCES

FOUNDATION SUPPORT, PART ONE

FIRST, THE LETTER-OF- INQUIRY...

By Will Maitland Weiss

You know what's great about Foundations? They exist for the express purpose of giving you money! You aren't begging, you aren't asking them for a favor, you aren't setting yourself up for intolerable attached strings... you are helping them to do their job and fulfill their mission.

Here's the catch: a billion other people also know this, and are also requesting a grant. How to get their attention?

IN THE BEGINNING...

- You really do have to check out what and who (and when and where) they fund. The fact that you've heard that some other theatre/music/dance company got \$10,000 from them may mean nothing. Happily, this is the 21st century, and it is all there online. [The other, best source for foundation information is the Foundation Center]
- You need to check what they fund (their mission); what other organizations they have funded; what kind of support they give (general operating, project, capital, etc.); where they give it (in what cities, states, regions); when they give it (once a year, four times a year, whenever they feel like it?); *if* they accept un-solicited proposals (if yes, that's great; if not, you can sometimes still send a letter of inquiry); how much they give (total in grants, range of grants, average grant?); who is on their board and staff. All or most of this is out there.

THEN...

- Sometimes they require a Special Form. Fine: fill it out, send it in (with whatever attachments they request and NO MORE). Most often, they ask for a Letter of Inquiry [LoI]. And when they don't make it clear what they want, that's what you are going to send them anyway. [*Read on about The Letter, below...*]

AND THEN...

- You have to sit back and wait. Remember, sometimes they deal with requests just once or twice a year—your sense of urgency and theirs are not the same.
- But you can jump up and down and wave your arms in front of them... a little bit. A week or so after you send your Lol, you can call and see if they got it (if not, obviously you can re-send) and can ask casually in what time frame you might expect a response. Could be a few weeks, could easily be six months.
- And you can invite them to stuff. There are obvious, huge benefits if they succumb, and agree to come to your performance/workshop/class/event/whatever. Even if they do not, you are adding to their consciousness (previously = zero?) of your existence. If they decline the opening night in September, a month later you can invite them again, to the 'graduation' of your student-artists in December, and so on.
- Best of all: have someone **else** contact them. A Company Board member who knows a Foundation Board member. A donor to your Company who knows a Foundation Board member. Another artist who has been funded, who knows someone at the Foundation, and will put in a good word ("Please consider joining me at a performance by...").
- Keep doing this. Keep inviting, keep searching for a contact. Don't count on it, but don't give up.

THE LETTER...

Often, the Foundation will spell out "no more than three pages;" you're going to try to get your message to them in two pages. Sometimes, they will specify that they want to know the scope of your project, its audience, its budget, whatever. Unless they specify otherwise, here's what you are going to include in your two pages:

- The best opening is a **personal contact**, i.e. "Jane Doe [one of their trustees? one of yours? the friend-of-a-friend, but someone they will recognize] suggested I contact you regarding support for..." Absent that, you're going to parrot back something from their Web site/mission: "Recognizing that the ABC Foundation is a leader in arts/education support..." or "Recognizing ABC Foundation's commitment to nurturing young artists..." or some such, "I hope you will be able to provide advice on a project to..." whatever you hope the impact of your project will be.
- First, tell them **why** you want to do what you want them to help pay for. How is this going to change lives, advance the art form, improve the world. Short,

clear, compelling. Needs to be clear how it relates to *their* mission/strategic objectives.

- They need to know the basics: not just **what** it is, but **when** and **where** and **how much** it is going to cost and how much you are seeking in contributed support. You get bonus points for identifying other existing or prospective funding (“Toward the total project budget of \$100,000, we have secured gifts or pledges of \$25,000 and are anticipating fees/ticket income of \$50,000. We are looking for additional support to offset the balance of \$25,000.”)
- **Why your company** is exactly the right organization to pull this off? Here’s your chance to give them a paragraph about your distinguished history and/or that of the creative personal involved.
- Another bonus: suggesting—up front—how “success” will be measured and **evaluated**. *Quantity* of people served (butts-in-seats; kids-in-workshops; whatever) and (harder!) *qualitative* reception (anticipated press/media coverage? evaluation forms? focus groups?).
- Corporations (and some individuals) generally care more about this than Foundations, but everyone has an ego. So point out to them how supporters will be recognized and thanked (program listing? Banners/posters/ad presence? Are they invited to attend, to meet artists?). Is there a report (formal or informal) afterwards? **What’s in it for them?**
- Almost done now. Circle back around to reminding them (again) how this grant will Make A Difference—not in your cash flow, in the lives of those who experience the project.
- You may have an opportunity for them to attend a performance/workshop/class/event/etc. which you wish to include in this letter. And in any case, you will make it clear **who they contact**—by e-mail or phone— if they have any questions, now or ever. Tell them that you will be in touch with their office to follow up (as you will!), and how much you welcome an opportunity to (a) discuss with them how they and/or others might lend support, and (b) to submit a full proposal.
- And thank them for their consideration.

Two pages. Three is OK, two is better. One is almost never enough (but could be OK). At least one inch margins, 12 point font; if it looks crowded, assume they will keep putting it on the bottom of the pile (or worse). Always include a copy of your 501(c)(3) federal tax status letter (or that of your fiscal agent). Usually include a (one-page!!) **budget, a board list, staff** and/or **key creative bios**, one brilliant review of

past work from the *Times* or the best objective journal you can muster, and a four-color, exciting **print piece**. You get to send them more stuff later... *if* this works to open the door!

CCR strongly recommends that you **read your LETTER OF INQUIRY aloud**, preferably to someone who does not intimately know about the project. If it sounds terrible, or just awkward, you will know; so re-write it. If it is not clear (why, what, when, where, how much, why you-and-uniquely-you), you will know. Make it clear.

CCR:WMW 08/05