

Tips for Contacting a Program Officer

August 2013

Approximately 60% of proposals are eliminated right away because the topic wasn't a good match or the proposer didn't follow the directions! Having pre-proposal contact with a program officer or member of the sponsoring agency is highly recommended. Contact this person as early as possible, BEFORE you begin writing your proposal.

WHY you should contact the program officer:

- It will help you assess whether or not your idea aligns with the funding source. A program officer will often tell you if your idea is a good match for the funding source or if changes are necessary before your proposal would be acceptable. If the program officer likes your proposal, then s/he may provide helpful hints on how to shape your proposal in ways that will result in a positive review. If the primary project theme is not likely to be funded, the program officer will likely let you know this, thus reducing his or her workload...and yours.
- It gives you a chance to introduce yourself and your organization and establish a rapport with the program officer. Particularly with foundations or non-profit organizations, a funder will not make an award to an organization that has not contacted them. Having a good rapport with the program officer will often give you a very competitive edge, especially if the competition is close.
- It is their job. Program officers answer questions from potential applicants as part of their assigned job duties. Don't think that you are "bothering" them; they are there to talk with you.
- Program officers may give you information that isn't contained in the published materials, such as reviewer preferences, preferable budget requests and project structures. Program priorities can shift while the solicitation may remain the same.
- A program officer's initial reaction to a proposal is a very good indicator of the probability for success.
- If your project is not a good match, the program officer may be able to suggest better alternatives.
- Ask about becoming a reviewer – this is a great way to become educated in grant writing!

STEPS for contacting a program officer:

1. Identify the program, study the guidelines, understand the mission of the program or organization, and look up recent awards to see how your work will make a contribution or fill a gap in the knowledge. A bit of preparation beforehand shows that you are serious and committed.
2. Write a brief pre-abstract (1/2 page). List your main objectives, methods, and outcomes. Stress the project's uniqueness and how the outcomes will address an important problem or contribute to the field.
3. Contact the program officer EARLY – before you begin writing your proposal!!!
4. Start with an email. Introduce yourself, explain your intentions, ask to have a phone conversation and for times that the program officer would be available to talk with you. Attach the pre-abstract to this email and indicate why you think your project will achieve the grant program's objectives. End by asking if your work is the kind the program might consider as competitive.
5. Take advantage of professional meetings and meet with program officers there. Be prepared for a spur of the moment conversation and don't waste time asking questions for which the answers are commonly available.
6. Discussion questions to consider include the following:
 - a. Does your project fall within the current priorities?
 - b. Any recommendations on ways to improve your chances for a favorable review? Are there particular things that you should include in your proposal? Anything in particular that has been overlooked by other applicants?

- c. What are some common reasons for proposals to be rejected? Listen between the lines to determine if you think the program officer likes your proposal or not. Also pay attention to any information shared in regard to project duration or budget averages or limits; information that might not be available in the guidelines.
 - d. Keep your discussion positive; don't focus on negatives in the current field or how your project will blow everyone else away.
 - e. Are there any parts of the guidelines that you don't understand? Now would be the time to get clarification.
 - f. Ask the program officer to describe a typical funding cycle and/or typical project. What are the average funding rates? Who are grants typically awarded to? What is the funding range and average grant amount? What are some examples of projects typically funded through this mechanism?
 - g. Ask about the review process. Who reviews the proposals? How many proposals does each reviewer read? How is the review carried out?
 - h. Is there anything else that the program officer thinks you should know about the grant competition?
7. Follow-up with a short thank you. You could also mention your desire to become a reviewer and attach a 1 page CV for his or her reference.

Literature Cited:

Porter, R. *Can we Talk? Contacting Grant Program Officers*. Research Management Review, V17:I1, Fall/Winter 2009.

Spires, MJ. *What to Say and Not to Say to Program Officers*. The Chronicle of Higher Education. March 28, 2012.