

# Reflections on Fundraising – What to improve and avoid

*This is not a criticism of fundraisers but more a light-hearted section with tips on common things that could be done better. As fundraising departments get ever larger, over time, it is easy to lose sight of the basic things that can improve or weaken fundraising.*

## ***The Basics***

- **Do examine the funder's latest annual report/accounts for trends and interests;**
- **Do look at size of recent grants made, to whom and for what;**
- **Do not make unrealistic funding requests;**
- **Do read the Guidelines for Applicants;**
- **Do check advice on time taken to process your application and how long it might take to hear back;**
- **Apply in good time.**

## ***First impressions count***

Opening paragraphs of funding applications are crucial, as are first conversations. Ensure information is clear, relevant and concise.

Recognise that you may have become institutionalised. Just because you know what your organisation does in detail, do not assume others will. Explain or avoid acronyms.

Do your research and make any questions relevant. It is irksome when people ask questions by email, during a call, or Zoom/Teams meeting, which are covered in guidelines or websites, many of which have a FAQ section. This is wasting the funder's and your time, and shows you have not done your research.

Make your requested amount realistic in proportion to project costs, the funding gap or organisational turnover.

Stick to the funder's guidance about how and when to apply.

### *Apply in good time*

Guidelines on when to apply and how long it will take to give you a decision are there for a reason. Never apply at the last minute and expect to jump the queue. This always looks bad, rushed and mostly leads to failure.

Most trusts and foundations do not fund retrospectively. You are unlikely to receive funding if your project has already started, or will start, before the funder has assessed your application.

An exception might be funding for capital projects, but always check this carefully.

### *Case for support*

It is essential to make the case for support. Summarise what you do, include the context for your work or project, and explain why support is needed.

The funding request must appear essential, not optional or desirable. Be clear about outcomes and how success will be achieved and measured.

Make your ask specific and explicit, even for core costs. A surprising number of applicants don't make this clear - you are left wondering what the funding requirement is, or whether it is a general ask. Online application systems, now the norm, have partly helped resolve this by requiring specific questions to be answered.

However, online forms have resulted in longer and less considered cut and paste responses, which can result in less focussed, weaker applications.

Similarly, AI generated applications may be quick to generate but are often much weaker because they do not sound authentic.

Do not pad out online form answers just to meet maximum word count. Always summarise and be concise.

### *Capital Funding*

If you are applying for capital funding, apply early. Try to discuss an application in advance of project commencement, or in its early stages before plans are carved in stone.

Your capital project must come across as essential and not simply desirable.

Don't just detail the costs and timescale of, for example, your new studio theatre, building revamp, seating reconfiguration, or new front entrance. Explain why capital works are needed now. What has changed? After all, you have existed for 20 years or so without a studio theatre, or without reconfiguring the auditorium. Why now?

Importantly, make clear how the project will help deliver your mission better financially, artistically, or educationally, in the future.

Always ensure your contingency budget is adequate. Few building projects are completed exactly on time or budget.

### *Bad news travels fast*

Don't ignore the elephant in the room. Being upfront and honest is always best, especially around financial problems or significant organisational changes. These things matter and will always come out eventually, so don't try to hide them.

Funders are more interested in how the organisation is addressing and resolving difficulties and issues. We understand that things can happen unexpectedly, go wrong, or suddenly change.

### *Expect some conditions*

Always spend the funding for the purpose requested, never spend it on something else – yes, it does happen occasionally! Unless for core funding, most grants are restricted funding.

Of course, if things change, or priorities alter, most trusts and foundations will try to be flexible if a grant has been awarded.

Don't expect that funding will arrive without some conditions. Don't file these away and forget them, especially evaluation updates. Ignoring reporting requirements exasperates a funder and causes them extra work. This has consequences; it could delay multi-year funding instalments, or prevent you from applying again soon. Worse still, grant offers may be withdrawn, or later multi-year funding instalments halted, if conditions of the grant cannot be met.

### *Retaining the relationship*

Development team members change frequently, and often, key information about previous applications and funder relationship history is lost. This is particularly relevant with smaller charities. Trusts and foundations have a long memory.

In addition, new team members may not be aware that overdue updates or evaluations are outstanding or overdue.

Never bank on getting the cash! It's a very competitive process. Just because you have emailed or spoken to someone at the trust or foundation does not mean that you have an advantage and will receive funding.

Likewise, do not bank on automatic repeat funding, especially after multi-year funding is complete. Continuing funding might be forthcoming, but funder guidelines may require a time gap before you can re-apply.

### *Hospitality – getting it right*

Do not offer excessive hospitality, especially when you are about to apply for a grant. Funders will probably decline due to a potential conflict of interest.

Nothing is worse than being bombarded with hospitality invitations during an application process and then never hearing from the organisation again - until the next time they wish to apply! Yes, this does happen and creates a poor impression.

Once a grant has been made, funders are happier to attend events and see your work in action.

### *Some final points*

Long-term fundraising involves subtle relationship building. Do remember, however, the funder may not want such a deep relationship as you might wish and will usually maintain a neutral but friendly stance.

Remember that all trusts and foundations are different by size, approach, remit and timescale.

Don't presume that all funders will be as helpful or open as others. Larger ones should be both, smaller ones have fewer staff and may appear reticent.

Above all, remember good fundraising is not about ticking boxes, but is a partnership between a compelling vision, a clear need and making the case.

DAVID HALL –  
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OF THE FOYLE  
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