Communicating With Funders and Program Officers

Grantseekers are routinely advised to contact sponsors before formally proposing ideas, but most grantseekers would, in the words of proposal development specialist Michael J. Spires, "rather undergo a root canal without anesthesia than call a program officer." Although people avoid contacting program officers, pre-proposal communication helps establish a relationship with the sponsor. In addition, the program officer's immediate response to a project is a great predictor (although not guarantee) of success.

Robert Porter has outlined some valid reasons to contact a program officer:
- To confirm if a project idea fits with the sponsor's and program's objectives.
- To obtain guidance about a project's design, collaboration, budget, and timeline.
- To discover any underlying considerations, methodology trends, preferences, dislikes, and shifting priorities that do not appear in published material.

Confirming if a proposed idea fits with the program's objective is especially important. Marilyn Dickey writes that one foundation instantly rejects ~80% of proposals because they don't fit program objectives.

Logistics of Contacting a Program Officer

Identify the point of contact or program officer most suited to your project by looking online. Unless you have a simple question (but not so simple that you could have easily found it online or in the RFP), avoid cold calling the sponsor. First, send the officer or point of contact an email.

In your email exchange, you can (1) request to talk to the sponsor on the phone, writing, for example, "I would like to set up a time to discuss the programmatic relevance of my idea for a grant. I would be happy to send you a copy of my overview section in advance of the meeting." By having your overview section done and giving the program officer the opportunity to read it before you speak on the phone, you will get more out of the conversation, and it speaks to your commitment. Don't send a rough outline— make it as close to a final draft as possible. Alternatively, in the first email exchange, you can (2) ease into a request to talk to a sponsor on the phone by briefly explaining your project (your elevator pitch) and asking if your project is something the sponsor would consider. If you see encouragement or have further questions, ask the program officer if you can contact them via phone to discuss issues that were raised in their email. List your available dates and times as a courtesy to the officer's time.

Sometimes, you might encounter an unresponsive program officer, but there's almost always more than one name on the RFP for you to contact. Go to another name, and do not complain about the unresponsive one. If they refer you back to the unresponsive person, try another name. If they refer you back to the first person, then it would be appropriate to say something like, "Thank you. I have been unsuccessful in getting in touch with ___. Can you help me get in touch or advise me on how best to reach ____?" When you do get a program officer on the phone, be prepared to discuss your project in depth and have specific questions for the officer.

Follow-up with a thank you email.

Questions for a Program Officer

Questions to ask a program officer include:
- Does the proposed project match the sponsor's/program's current priorities? If it does not, ask for suggestions to alter the project or about other programs that might make a better fit.
- What can be done to improve the chances of a favorable review? The program officer probably knows this is why you are calling, so there is no reason to be shy about asking.

- What are the most common reasons a proposal is rejected? This question might help you understand some of the underlying considerations of a review panel. However, sometimes they publish this information online, so look for it on the agency website first.
- Are there any emerging interests within the program? Again, this can help get at some underlying considerations that do not appear in print materials.
- Is the award amount expected to change compared to the previous year? What is the anticipated success ratio for the grant cycle? Be careful that these questions are not already answered online!

Quick Tips

Before speaking with a program officer, be sure that you:
- Read the agency's and funding program's web pages, the RFP (more than once), any FAQs or supporting documentation.
- Prepare a brief, one-page concept paper, or your overview section, or your list of specific aims or research questions.
- Do not cold call. Send an email first.
- Will be brief and direct. (Be ready to state the goal of your project and give an elevator pitch).
- Have a couple of questions prepared.
- Are ready to LISTEN to the program officer (especially for any information that does not appear in the RFP and particularly in regards to objectives or priorities).
- Show passion for your project.

There are also various things you should *not* be doing when speaking with a program officer:
- Don't speak disparagingly of your colleagues or competitors.
- Don't try to force-fit your interests to the grant program objectives.
- Don't try to tell the program officer what you think they should be funding.
- Don't focus overmuch on yourself or your past/future greatness.
- Don't overwhelm the program officer with papers and materials.
- Don't deliver a lengthy monologue/presentation about the project.
- Don't ask questions for which they had already published answers in guides or online.

If Waiting for Notice After Submission

It can be agonizing to wait for feedback on a proposal you put so much time and effort into. But when is it okay to call a funder?
- Check the funder's website to see if they have any guidelines or timelines for this.
- NSF review takes about six months, and one program officer's advice is "don't bug them before this six months is up."
- Even if you hear that your colleague received notice already regarding their proposal to the same grant program, do not call the funder to say you heard that Dr. Smith received notice of funding; when will I? Unless it has passed the review period.

The review period varies depending on the type of grant sponsor:
- Federal agencies can take between three and six months to accept or reject a proposal.
- State sponsors can take up to six months to accept or reject a proposal.
- Foundations can take up to one year to contact applicants. However, foundations are more likely than federal and state sponsors to contact an applicant to tell him or her when an application is pending.

- Corporate sponsors can take up to six months to contact grantseekers. Like foundations, corporations are more likely to contact applicants to confirm an application was received and is pending. However, corporations will not always contact the applicant if his or her proposal is rejected.
- Each agency may be different. Look at their online materials for guidance.

If Accepted

Congratulations! You will need to maintain a good relationship with your sponsor/program officer.

- Send a thank you.
- Take your annual reports, highlights, PI meetings, or other required communications very seriously.
- If you have something really exciting to talk about (our research that you funded is being featured in this movie!), don't wait to tell them—let your program officer know right away. This could be a talking point for them with their administration.
- For local foundations, consider inviting the program officer/director to major events, send newsletters, and send information on major developments or the people being served by the grant.
- For government funding, expect that you will need to develop an annual work plan, write quarterly progress reports, and write annual reports.

If Rejected

Nobody likes being turned down, but in the grant world, we can't take it personally. Don't give up, and don't burn bridges.

- Send a thank you, and request reviewer comments. For government proposals, you can get reviewer comments easily; for foundations, it may not be possible.
- Use the reviewer comments to look for patterns and assess how you can strengthen your proposal. Do not use them to pick a fight with the reviewers or program officer.
- If reviewer comments are not available, perhaps the program officer can answer a couple of questions regarding the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the project and proposal, whether resubmission is possible or desired, and whether your contact can recommend any other sponsors who might be interested in the proposal.
- Always send a note of thanks after interactions with the program officer—even if they denied both your proposal and your requests for reviewer comments. Take the opportunity to leave a good impression of yourself as a professional who recognizes that the program officers are busy people and that you are grateful for their time.

Prepare an Elevator Pitch

Perhaps you are meeting a program officer at a conference or a workshop held in your region. In such a case, it would be helpful to have an elevator pitch ready to go. The goal of an elevator pitch is to leave a good first impression and to open the doors for further communication. Your elevator pitch should:

- Introduce the topic of the project in a way that is clearly related to the sponsor's or program's objectives and mission.
- State the problem or opportunity that the project addresses while highlighting its importance.
- Explain how you plan to solve the problem or realize the opportunity.

- Explain the expected outcomes of the project, again thinking of how the outcomes relate to a larger goal and the sponsor's mission.
- Highlight the ways your project is unique.

Your elevator pitch should take about 30-60 seconds to say in a conversational tone. Do not use jargon. Write down what you want to say and practice until you can recite it without hesitation. Half a page of written material should be sufficient. Make different versions of your pitch depending on your audience. A good set of criteria to keep in mind can be found in Heilmeier's Catechism.

Heilmeier's Catechism

George H. Heilmeier was an American engineer who spent much of the 1970's in the United States Department of Defense, including becoming director of DARPA; was vice-president of Texas Instruments; was president and CEO of Bellcore; and was a pioneering contributor to liquid crystal displays. Heilmeier's Catechism is a set of questions credited to Heilmeier that anyone proposing a research project or product development effort should be able to answer.

- What are you trying to do? Articulate your objectives using absolutely no jargon.
- How is it done today, and what are the limits of current practice?
- What's new in your approach, and why do you think it will be successful?
- Who cares?
- If you're successful, what difference will it make?
- What are the risks and the payoffs?
- How much will it cost?
- How long will it take?
- What are the midterm and final "exams" to check for success?