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Readers of this journal know that obtaining grant support is increasingly difficult, regardless of the grant-giving organization. In today's world, investigators must cast their nets widely to increase their odds of success. But assuming that a National Institutes of Health (NIH)-style application is best often will not win the hearts of private-sector funders. Consequently, those who have not applied to foundations before may find themselves in unfamiliar territory.

Private-sector funders (called *foundations* here for simplification) display great variety in their aims, size, and purposes, so it is inappropriate to adopt a “one-size-fits-all” approach. That said, they do possess features in common. The purpose of this article is to discuss (1) how foundations differ from other kinds of funders and (2) tips for grant writers to help them better understand the priorities and thought processes of foundations. Space precludes a discussion of other relevant issues (eg, conducting searches for potential funders). However, a better understanding of the concepts included will make applicants' dealings with foundations more likely to be productive.

FOUNDATIONS AT A GLANCE

For the purposes of this article, I have divided the different types of foundations into the following five

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categories: corporate (eg, Eli Lilly or Alcoa); family bequest (eg, Doris Duke Foundation); regional or local, special interest (eg, Lance Armstrong Foundation [prostate cancer]); and “big business” (extremely large foundations, eg, Robert Wood Johnson, MacArthur, or Gates). Even within these examples, variations are clear, but these overall distinctions can help to clarify grant-writing strategies.

In general, foundations like projects that address their mission (often a social good); have a demonstrable and current human impact, particularly locally; and may not be suited to NIH-type proposals (too small, not allowed, or preliminary in nature). Many foundations believe they exist to support good ideas regarding topics that are important to them.

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES: SUMMARY

Compared to the process for NIH funding, applying for private-sector funding has some advantages. These include shorter applications (< 10 pages), quicker funding cycles, and having personal contact (especially in smaller foundations). In addition, many foundations like to fund projects in communities where they have offices or plants (known as “geographic advantage”), and some will fund bricks-and-mortar projects (eg, renovations, updates, or new construction) that are hard to support via other types of funding.

Of course, private-sector proposals also have some potential disadvantages. For example, an applicant with no corporate presence in his or her community will lack a geographic advantage with the foundation of that company. Similarly, short applications are not effective platforms for complex ideas. Many foundations only provide smaller awards (say, under \$50,000) and may limit allowable costs. Furthermore, economic conditions can slash the amount of funding a foundation has available. The increased difficulty in obtaining funding from federal sources means that competition for foundation support is

greater than ever. And finally, because foundations are mission-based, they often have an agenda about what they want to fund.

Lest this list sound too daunting, here are some quick tips for consideration.

- **Time:** One obvious advantage of shorter proposals is that they take less time to prepare. In the world of foundation funders, one can send the same idea to multiple places simultaneously. Sometimes, foundations will entertain several ideas at once from an applicant. Such efficiency can be critical in sustaining a research program.
- **Personal contact:** This is not a “buddy” network, but the ability to engage with a real person at the foundation, who may become an advocate for the applicant’s ideas, assist in the process, and encourage a continuing relationship for future projects. Such interest in one’s research can pay big dividends eventually, even if the first application is unsuccessful.
- **Geographic advantage:** Checking the local Yellow Pages may reveal a hitherto unknown corporate presence. As corporations diversify and expand their supply and information networks in a global economy, geographic advantage is not as limiting as it once was. Grant-giving is also good public relations, so corporate foundations are interested in “giving back” to the community in this way.
- **Needs:** Getting external funding for infrastructural improvements, for example, is challenging. However, some foundations welcome such proposals, and others are willing to consider them. Still others do not predetermine categories, but consider proposals as they are received.
- **Agenda:** Applications need to address issues that the foundation cares about. Note that foundations can limit what types of proposals they will consider (*eg*, no animal research or only programs within a specific region). It is prudent to regard any such criteria as nonnegotiable.

In summary, do your homework before approaching any foundation.

THE APPLICATION PROCESS

Some foundations do not consider unsolicited proposals. However, many have an online submission process; sometimes applicants must receive approval (based on an abstract or short summary) before submitting a full proposal. Some foundations require a face-to-face meeting before they will entertain a full proposal, which allows an applicant’s passion for a project to emerge. It also enables the applicant to learn more about the foundation and its staff.

A 3-to-5-page letter of intent is one way for funders to assess potential interest. Applicants should focus on key points (*eg*, why the goals of the project align with those of the foundation, why the project is needed, why this group is uniquely suited to carry it out, and any geographic advantage). Letters that result in requests for full proposals increase the odds of success enormously, so crafting a top-notch letter of intent is wise.

In crafting a full proposal, be sure to follow the funder’s instructions; they vary widely. The Common Grant Application (<http://www.nng.org/cga.html>), a template used by many foundations, is a useful guide. The same points noted in your letter of intent should be highlighted, with more detail, in a full proposal (usually 10 pages).

Remember to write for your audience. Local or family foundations may use lay people as reviewers, whereas corporate and big-business foundations will use content experts plus other stakeholders. Lay advocates are regularly included as grant reviewers in some settings.

Rendering a decision on a proposal is almost always faster at foundations (roughly 3 to 4 months) than the NIH, although the time span varies. For example, some foundations permit negotiation, while others may request more data before making a final decision. However, if a proposal is not successful, often little feedback is given (although most foundations will provide details at the applicant’s request).

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