



Content for the Nonprofit Sector on Technology and Internet Strategy

Beyond the Case Statement: Your Grant Proposal

Clear goals and a careful cost/benefit evaluation will help

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Writing a good proposal for a technology grant is tricky. The core of the proposal is your case statement (see the articles "Writing a Winning Grant Proposal," "Position Yourself to Write a Superior Technology Proposal," and the worksheet "Building a Great Case Statement Funding Planner" in this packet for more details).

Beyond that, it is important to address other aspects related to good technology use and sustainability. Funders now realize that buying the actual equipment, though important, is just one part of the equation.

This article is part of TechSoup's *Adopting Technology Series* focused on Funding. You can find this and other articles online at www.techsoup.org/adopting_tech.cfm

You may get to the top of the funder's pile with a great case statement, but your proposal will look much less impressive upon closer inspection if you do not address critical aspects of technology use such as training, support, and evaluation. A proposal that demonstrates your understanding of these issues will inspire confidence that you are realistic about what it takes to make things work.

On Leadership

As with any significant change, technology adoption is greatly enhanced by advocacy and support from the organization's leadership along with active participation by others involved.

Most people in the nonprofit technology field understand that new technology needs the support of staff, board members, and collaborating partners. But you need more than the support of those who will deploy, manage, and use the proposed technology; you need to have your organization's leaders on board. If staff members are asked to spend time learning a new system but the executive director still won't touch e-mail, your technology plan probably won't go far. Funders need to know that your organization's leadership is supportive. (Read "Technology Leadership" at <http://www.techsoup.org/articlepage.cfm?ArticleId=278> for more information.)

Leverage

Proposals are far more attractive to funders when you articulate ways that their funding can make other good things happen -- this is what we mean by "leverage." What will you do with the technology that will lead to more funding or free up time and money you can use to advance your mission in other ways? Ask yourself if you are taking advantage of the opportunity to use the grant, if you get it, to unleash other resources. Will you now be able to work more closely with partners? Are there other funders who will find your project more attractive to fund if you get an initial grant? Funders appreciate when you can help them see how their grant will trigger other beneficial things, particularly increasing other resources for your organization.

Lessons Learned

Most funders appreciate when you share lessons you've learned -- good and bad -- from previous attempts to implement technology in your organization. Your proposal should discuss how you will take advantage of these lessons. Openly identify the risks of the proposal and how you will mitigate them.

For example, getting staff to adopt new technology and training them is often particularly challenging. What hurdles will your staff face when learning the new tools? How will you address them? What things might stop your staff from interacting in new ways? How will you motivate them to take the time to learn new technology, and how will you reward them? How will your organization respond to these issues?

Marketers would like us to think of technology as plug-and-play, but in reality that's rarely the case. It can be frustrating for nonprofit staff -- who are already stretched thin -- to juggle their jobs while learning a new database or networking system. Funders know this and will want to see a training plan that takes into account staff turnover and system upgrades. After a year or two, your grant may have run out, but you'll still need to train your people. Anticipate these issues and show your prospective funder how you intend to tackle them. Here's a tip: standardization and documentation can save you headaches down the road.

Evaluation

Evaluating the success of your proposed technology project is a critical component of your proposal. Some people call this return on investment (ROI). The better your methods of measuring success, the better you will be able to evaluate whether you are meeting your goals. Likewise, a good planning process with outputs, outcomes, and a timeline will help you evaluate whether you are on target. (See Strategic Technology's Toolkit www.strategictechnology.net/cwpm.html#planning for more information.)

You need to identify a starting baseline against which you can measure your project's success. For example, if you are putting up new Web pages where people can download fact sheets about toxic waste dumps near playgrounds, how do you currently distribute those fact sheets? How many do you distribute per month or year? Do you know? If not, can you estimate? This number will be your baseline. A year after the Web pages are up, you can take a look at the number of people who view the Web pages or downloaded the fact sheet. You can ask those who downloaded the fact sheets if they distributed them to others. When you compare this number to your baseline, you can get a real sense of the success of this project.

Clearly identify -- to yourself and the funder -- what success will look like. Develop a baseline and measure success.

The Technology Budget

If possible, do not make your technology project budget an add-on to your regular organizational budget unless it is a specific, time-bound project. We strongly suggest that you find ways to integrate your technology budget into your regular organizational budget (both administrative and program budgets). Seriously think about how technology can be supported on an ongoing basis through your operating budget.

This does not preclude you from using technology costs in proposals as part of your program expenses. For funders that fund infrastructure, this is not a problem. As one funder said, "We would never dream of making a grant to an organization that has no mailing address or telephone number. Having a space and a phone is just a part of the cost of doing business. Likewise, we have to think about technology in the same vein, and support is a regular cost of doing business." Nonprofits need to reinforce this idea by better integrating technology into their operations during the budgeting process.

For most other funders, your proposal should attach technology costs to a project or program. For example, let's say that you need to upgrade your wide area network so three of your sites can communicate. You need 10 new computers, high-speed Internet access, training, and support. You may know a funder that will support this effort simply with the understanding that it will improve your efficiency as an organization.

Otherwise, when you need these "infrastructure" improvements, you should send proposals to funders that support your programs in the community. Ask yourself how your improved wide area network will help you programmatically. Maybe the high-speed access will make it easier for you to transfer data you collect to the database where you do community mapping. Possibly some of the new computers will be used by staff that are looking at the data or writing up the results into policy papers. Find a way to make the connection between infrastructure funding and specific programs.

On Recurring Expenses

Where will the money come from after the grant runs out? How do you propose to sustain the technology next year and the year after? This is a rather weighty and controversial issue. Here are two approaches we've heard mentioned repeatedly:

1. Increase the integration of technology support into your operations and clearly articulate this plan to your funders; and
2. Diversify funding for projects so that they come from several sources over time, so that each source of support builds logically upon the next.

Some comments from funders might clarify these points:

"If we're going to fund technology for an organization, not only do we need to know that they know what they need and can make good use of it, we also need to see plans for how the continuous upgrade and continuous training pieces are integrated into the operating budget of the organization. Most funders that fund the start-up programs want to see the long-term plan for this program being integrated into the organization's core, because we can't fund core operations or programs in perpetuity. This is not an easy thing to do and I don't mean to suggest that it is something that can be automatic. But I think that this is an additional piece of thinking that nonprofits have to do and a case they have to make with their own boards around resource allocation. If funders see nonprofits undertaking those tough decisions, then I think we have greater insurance that our investment is well-spent."

"Frankly, for my board, any indication that there are multiple supporters for an investment makes it more compelling. For example, fairly recently we got a proposal in which it was made clear that, for the proposal to be fully funded, there had to be five funding partners, and each partner was going to have to take a piece. There was the tech assessment, the acquisition of hardware, the acquisition of software, the training, and a two-year IT consultant built into the proposal as a whole, which was part of creating a bigger database, a bigger data management project for multiple organizations. The five funders all agreed to do it, because we knew that our piece was simply a part of a much bigger, well thought-out plan."

The Presentation

Be sure to present your proposal professionally. Follow the foundation's guidelines to the letter. This should be elementary, but program officers tell us again and again that many proposals do not make the first cut because they don't adhere to the guidelines.

Look at your proposal carefully and critically before you send it out (and before the deadline, of course).

- Is it written in a positive tone, focusing on solutions rather than problems?
- Is it easy to read and organized in an eye-pleasing way?
- Is it logical in its structure and organization?
- Does it avoid jargon and excessive acronyms?
- Does it look professional?
- Does it meet all of the guidelines in terms of style, length, and sequence?

See MAP's "Technology Grantwriting Tips" www.managementhelp.org/fndrsng/np_raise/np_raise.htm for other helpful pointers.

While it may sound picky to focus on formatting, remember that program officers are inundated with requests. If they ask you to lay out your proposal in an A-B-C-D format and you send B-D-C-A, the first impression they'll get is that you didn't answer question A. Similarly, avoid the temptation to combine distinct sections into one. Grant review panels often use a scoring sheet so that all proposals are judged equally. If they have to hunt through your document to find where you answered the evaluation question, there's always the chance they could overlook your information. Finally, be sure that your narrative, budget, and evaluation plan tell the same story. If you're requesting funds for computers for an after-school program and your goal is to increase test scores, you need to measure test scores, not just attendance or student satisfaction.

If this all sounds challenging, that is because it is. Many funders admit that they are behind the curve when it comes to supporting technology. The good news is, many more are climbing onto the bandwagon and educating their peers in the process. Write a good proposal, get it funded, and document your results - the impact will go a long way.