

Dos and Don'ts of Grant Proposals for Tech Funding

At a time when computers seem necessary for almost everything, grantmakers that offer specific funding for technology are likely to be flooded with proposals. How can a nonprofit maximize its chances for success when requesting such funding? To find out, we talked to somebody with considerable experience reviewing tech proposals: Michele Cavataio, Senior Director of Corporate Relations at America Online (AOL).

Cavataio has been reviewing grant applications for much of her career, first for the Department of Commerce's Telecommunications and Information Infrastructure Assistance Program and later at AOL. During that time she has formulated a list of proposal dos and don'ts for any applicant who wants to make it a little more likely that the funder will say yes.

DOs

Do add interesting technology components to proven ideas.

For a lot of funders, funding for cutting-edge technology isn't immediately attractive, Cavataio says. Most are going to want to see how the nonprofit is using technology to be innovative in fulfilling its mission.

One way to do that, Cavataio says, is to look at tried-and-true methods of delivering your services that you know work, and then asking how technology can make them better. One example is telementoring—where mentoring is combined with the ability to telecommunicate. Funders have seen mentoring projects before and may be excited by the prospect of using technology to extend a classic technique.

It's easy to tout the new technology that promises to make your organization better, faster and stronger, but funders don't just want to hear about the technology. They want to know what you are planning to do with it. A good idea that uses old technology will trump a nebulous idea that uses the cutting edge.

Do know how you fit into past and current projects.

Thorough research can help nonprofits know where they stand before their lack of funding tells them.

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It is important, Cavataio says, to show that you are aware of how other agencies may be doing the same thing that you propose to do, aware of how your project will fit into the context in which you are working, and aware of your project's complexity.

Funders are less likely to support your effort if you simply latch onto a hot idea and do the same thing everyone else is doing, Cavataio says. One example is community technology centers, which aim to help those with little access to technology to become a part of the wired world. While such facilities may be a great idea—something, in fact, that AOL actively promoted in the 1990s—an organization that is seeking funding must still explain why its particular center is a great idea.

If its technology center can't be differentiated from other centers, then it is less likely to be funded, Cavataio says. Knowing how to present that difference depends on research. Distinction and innovation may involve something as simple as putting a center where none other exists or as complex as setting up a jobs program for the homeless.

Do try to involve a team.

In all likelihood, someone in your community knows the technology for which you are trying to get funding better than you do. Perhaps they know better how to explain the technology, or where to get funding for the project, or how to get the project started.

Find that person or that organization and ask them to help. Not only will you get extra expertise and a fresh perspective, you'll get an advantage with prospective funders. They like to see that other people in the community feel the project is worth doing.

Do engage the intended beneficiaries.

Funders appreciate an organization's willingness to engage the population at which a project is aimed. Emphasize how the project will benefit that population by actually involving them, Cavataio says.

For instance, running a technology center for young people in an economically disadvantaged neighborhood may be a worthy undertaking. But

including those same young people in planning the project, operating the center, or setting up the computers will multiply the benefits.

Do have a good evaluation plan.

As with many other kinds of projects, technology-related or not, funders like to see a good evaluation plan in place. They want their money to buy results.

Cavataio suggests that evaluation is so important that you should consider budgeting 10 percent of the total proposed funds for it. Nonprofits that can plan for a continuing evaluation show a capacity for long-term thinking that is good in any endeavor.

Do anticipate training, breakdowns and obsolescence.

“Nonprofits need to go beyond talking about hardware and software when they write their proposals,” Cavataio says. That means addressing such needs as training, maintenance and time.

New technology will almost always require staff training to integrate it fully into the operation and take full advantage of its capabilities. Machines require maintenance, so a portion of the budget should be set aside for equipment and personnel, as well as contingency plans for downtime. In addition, rapid technological advances will inevitably render current utilities obsolete.

"Nonprofits applying for technology funding need to ask themselves, 'What is this project going to look like in three years?'" Cavataio says. "They need to plan to spend money."

Therefore, Cavataio says, they need to formulate a realistic budget, one that includes all the items for which they are likely to need money down the road. Funders want to see that an applicant has anticipated what resources the project will require to keep it going, including those that the agency may have to provide itself.

Do be direct and follow guidelines.

Cavataio emphasizes that any proposal should be as clearly written as possible—so the reviewer can spend her time thinking about your ideas, rather than puzzling over what you are attempting to say.

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If the funder has particular guidelines, follow them. They were established for your benefit as well as the funder's, helping to produce a more structured communication.

For technical projects, don't be afraid to go into detail. In fact, Cavataio recommends it, since most funders are going to want to know that you really understand what you are proposing to do.

Make sure the proposal is related to your organizational mission or to a clearly defined project goal. Just asking for new computers probably won't cut it, but asking for new computers so you can provide a particular service might.

Finally, don't worry that the proposal will trap you into an inflexible relationship with the funder. "AOL is very supportive when nonprofits have to make changes or have problems," Cavataio says. "We stay very involved during the entire process.

DON'Ts

Don't focus on the "cutting edge" nature of your technology; focus on intended outcomes.

Odds are you won't impress a technology-oriented funder by talking about the "cool" tech you'll be using to accomplish your goal. They've probably already heard of it, may be using it, and may very well know why you shouldn't be using it.

Focus on the outcome instead, Cavataio says. It's not enough to use the latest buzzwords; funders want to know what you are planning to accomplish. After that they'll decide whether to pay for the tech.

With that in mind, it's important to relate the level of technology you want (and, presumably, need) to the goal. "With this, we'll be able to do this" is a good way of relating tech needs to outcomes.

Don't request funding for basic operating activities; fold into other requests and think of it as an operating expense.

How can nonprofits get money for simple operating expenses rather than projects?

Well, the answer for tech funding is the same as the answer for most other grants: Often, you won't be able to.

But take heart. Think about how you get money for most operating expenses—for, say, things like desk chairs. It's probably easier to relate a new computer to your mission or to a project goal than it is to do the same with a place to sit. Cavataio suggests two possible courses for operational technology funding: folding it into project-oriented grants or simply treating it as another operating expense.

Folding operational technology into a project-oriented grant is feasible because of the nature of the technology most nonprofits require. Computers, most software, even phone equipment can be used for more than a single project, so if a nonprofit can find funding for project technology that is also useful for day-to-day operations, good for them.

Still, some things just aren't going to be applicable to specific projects. If so, and if the nonprofit is already getting operating support from a particular funder, consider asking them to help with tech needs as well.

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