The Top 10 Funding Application Errors

1) Applying for grants you can't possibly get

"If only they had read our eligibility criteria, they would clearly see we don't fund that"

Examples: Comic Relief has received applications on behalf of an HIV project in Tanzania for a fund that operates only in Stoke-on-Trent. The Big Lottery Fund (now called the National Lottery Community Fund) has received applications to fund the installation of double glazing in houses.

Have an informal chat: large funders welcome phone calls to discuss potential projects. It's better to try to get a sense of whether something is going to be a possibility or not, rather than ploughing ahead and potentially wasting a lot of time.

2) Asking for too much money. Or not enough

Receiving applications for unrealistic sums of money is another bugbear of funders. If a funder has set a limit, don't try to be a bit 'cheeky' and ask for more. Similarly, if there's a minimum amount, don't ask for less.

Some applicants ask for less money than they need in the mistaken belief that this will increase their chances of success. It's an assumption that's not correct. Be honest and realistic.

3) Providing too much information

Be clear and concise. Don't write too much but write it well. Don't waste words being repetitive.

For many trusts and foundations, you'll be asked to write a letter of application. An application letter should be no longer than two sides of A4. Keep the sentences short and use active language, e.g. 'our scheme helped 200 users in six months' not, 'in six months, 200 users were helped by our scheme'.

If you have to complete an application form, stick to the word limit – include only the really useful information and the data that supports it. Some funders regularly receive applications that are double the required length, or include weighty appendices, photographs or additional reports. In such cases, the applicant might be asked to re-send the application, which causes a delay, or simply be rejected and have to try again.

4) Confusing content

Avoid the temptation to throw in a few of the latest buzz words or phrases in your application. You might think it will give you an edge and make your organisation look relevant and current, but it often makes a project appear vague and confusing. Jargon and buzz words can confuse the reader and hide the detail of what you're trying to do. Don't feel that you've got to use a language you're not used to.

Funders may want people to apply in their own words, but they still need to make sure those words are readable. Funders work to deadlines and are often looking at 40 or 50 applications a week. There is nothing that makes the heart sink faster than a 'wall of words' with no paragraphs, really long sentences and very dense text.

Ask someone who doesn't know about the project to read through your applications before you submit them. Do they understand the message you are trying to deliver?

5) Uninspiring

Remember your bid is just one of many that a potential funder will have only short time to read. Many bids fail simply because they're not as compelling as others submitted during the same round. Make no mistake – this is a sales pitch! You are in competition with other projects so you must make yours stand out. This doesn't mean coming up with wild and wacky ideas, this means making sure you have followed all the advice above, and that you convey the enthusiasm that you, the project team and wider community have for the project and the value of the difference it will make. Show your organisation to be capable, credible and visionary, with definite aims and objectives and be positive. Some applications which focus too heavily on the problems faced can come across as very negative. Remember to talk about what will happen when you get the money. This will help the funder feel confident that you (and they) can make a difference. It also helps you show that your project does not begin and end with this application.

6) The budget doesn't add up

The budget should explain how the money will be spent on the project. Include all the relevant costs. If possible, show how you determined the costs. Remember to include things like insurance, utilities and legal fees. Your budget should be realistic and clearly relevant to your activity.

Simple errors are surprisingly common. For example, a budget is itemised, detailing all the costs that the group envisages, but the final amount has been added up wrongly. This is often because cost have been amended, but the final amount asked for remains unaltered. Check that any references to costs throughout the application match the financial summary.

Include Full Cost Recovery in your budget - securing funding for all the costs involved in running a project. This means that you can request funding for direct project costs and for a proportionate share of your organisation's overheads.

Remember to detail any in-kind or community contributions.

If the grant will not cover your full project budget, explain where the remaining funds will come from; funders sometimes prefer not to fund a whole project, and encourage you to secure a mix of income.

7) Forgetting to tailor the application to the funder

Identify potential funders at an early stage and get familiar with their criteria. Don't put this off.

Read the information on funders' websites. They don't publish it for fun. It's there to help and they really do mean what it says!   There is often a lot of information to take in. The earlier you engage with it, the more you (almost subconsciously) start to think of ways to meet the criteria. Next time you read it, it's likely you'll notice something you missed first time.

Then avoid cutting and pasting information onto different application forms without looking at the questions the funder is asking.

Funders will have a key set of guiding principles, an overall vision that they are trying to achieve. Your bid's outcomes need to be in step with those of the funder's. You'll need to show how you've identified the need for your service or project, engagement with the intended audience, and most importantly, the measurable outcomes you are aiming to achieve. You can use the same information for various applications, but ensure you tweak it to each funder's particular aims.

Some funders might give greater weight to hard, tangible outcomes than soft outcomes, they might also be less interested in the detail of how you will achieve these outcomes than other funders. Check first by contacting the grants officer or reviewing case studies on their websites.

There's an element of luck involved in any funding application. It can be a time-consuming process but keep going until you get a result - learn from advice and feedback (whether your bid is successful or not), and you can start to stack the odds in your favour.

8) Assuming the funder knows all about you

You and your colleagues know all about your organisation and its aims, but a potential funder is very unlikely to. To show the difference a project will make, you first have to describe the current position. Don't be afraid to describe how basic things might be now, the difficulties this creates, how the project will overcome them, and the difference this will make, not just for regulars, but more generally.   You know this, but a funder won't. All too often applications are written with an assumption that the funder has the basic knowledge about things such as who the beneficiaries are, what the project does, how they do it and what impact they have. People are often very passionate about their project and become so close to it that they can take things for granted. This is another reason why getting 'an outsider' to read your application is a good idea.

9) What difference will you make?

One the main reason applications are rejected lies in failing to show how the lives of beneficiaries will be improved.

Clearly state what the outcomes will be. What will change as a result of your project? Why should the funder be excited by this?

List all the great things the project will do, e.g. repair the roof, add toilets and a kitchen, employ a youth worker, and then imagine the funder is still left asking 'So what?' Spell out what will change because of the activities your project will undertake, and why this matters.

Support any claims you make with evidence, for example: government statistics, data you've collected from surveys or market research, monitoring information or extracts from reports by relevant agencies. Provide enough to back up specific statements. You may be able to send extra evidence, relevant promotional materials, annual reports etc. along with the application, although a grants officer may have no obligation to read anything that is not included in the actual form and if it's too much information your whole application may be returned to you to be re-submitted.

Identify any potential problems or risks and how you anticipate responding to them should they develop.

Demonstrate good governance; that your organisation is well run and can (by implication) manage this new project successfully.

10) Missing the deadline

Ensure the application is in by the deadline AND includes EVERYTHING the funder requires. Sounds simple but it's amazing how often applicants trip up on this point! Start filling in the form early, and if submitting online, aim to finalise it at least a couple of days before the deadline if possible, in case there's a supporting document which is not easy to find, and to guard against last minute technical glitches!

More Top Tips

Qualify your decision

There are three key questions you should always ask yourself before preparing a project proposal.

- Is it deliverable? (That is, can you do what needs to be done without having to significantly change your operating model or deviate from your core work?)

- Is it winnable? (That is, do you meet the funder's criteria in the first instance, and do you have a strong case that elevates your proposal above others?)

- Is it financially viable? (That is, can you do all that needs to be done with the funds available?)

Plan your requirements well in advance

You'll need to be fully aware of the timings of each round of funding, bearing in mind just how long decisions can take to arrive. You might also need to juggle multiple applications so that they each arrive at the right time.

Offer a human story

Try to include case studies of people you have helped or plan to help. This lets you show the impact of your work.

Create an evaluation plan for the project

Evaluation is an important part of every stage of the project; it can include formal and informal techniques. Some funders like to see something in place from the start to ensure the project will be reviewed and measured against the desired outcomes. But this isn't all about keeping records of numbers (eg of events and participants). Evaluation can be any sort of feedback about the project, so can include simply talking to people to find out what they thought. Create opportunities for this to happen.

Give yourself a Break

It's advisable to have a distinct 'Bid Writer' role on your project, someone who can be focused and isn't trying to juggle several tasks at once. It takes times to write an application or proposal and time to gather all the information you need. Even when you have all the information in front of you, whilst you might technically be able to complete an application in a day, it's very difficult to stay that focused on something which can be very detailed and often tedious. Give yourself a break, don't burn the midnight oil, ask for help if you need it and, whatever the outcome, accept praise for your hard work and move on.

Sources:

https://www.thirdsector.co.uk/top-10-funding-application-errors/fundraising/article/1143212

http://www.churchcare.org.uk/funding.php