

Great Ideas Aren't Enough

Fundraising tips by Regina Podhorin Zilinski

Regina Podhorin Zilinski is founder and president of The Leadership Group of Trenton, NJ, specializing in nonprofit fundraising. An Episcopalian, she is a member and faithful supporter of the FQA. In 1996, at the board's request, she wrote a sample grant proposal. [Excerpts from the introduction](#) follow this article.

It is getting increasingly difficult to find funding for individual artists. The fundraising tips which follow are focused on the needs of nonprofit organizations. Individual artists can use many of the guidelines when applying for the few sponsor grants that are still available. You may want to consider joining together with others to form a small nonprofit (as long as you can prove social benefit from your work). Even better is to affiliate with existing nonprofits or cooperatives.

Often in the world of nonprofit fundraising we hear the lament about the great idea that didn't get funding. Regardless of the "worthy" cause, there are often disappointments when looking for financial support. Most of these disappointments have to do with the following:

- asking the wrong group/person (mistargeting)
- asking in the wrong way (failing to follow the funder's guidelines)
- having an inadequate/incomplete description of your "product" (marketing)

Whether you're looking for support for an art show, musical performance or theater event, private and public funders will be looking for more than a good idea. They will be looking to be convinced that your good idea has social merit (what difference will it make, for whom?), that you have the skills and expertise to pull it off and that they will get a positive response (press, reputation) as a result of the work. Below are some quick hints for successful fundraising:

1. Knowing who to ask

a. Make sure that the group or person you are asking for money has a reason to be interested in the work. Cold calling (or writing) in fundraising is a waste of time and money. Donor "prospecting" is a major fundraising activity. Research sources are the Internet, Foundation directories, state and local libraries and especially your friends

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and co-workers! It is a very small world and keeping up your networking makes it even smaller. Your co-worker's wife may just work for that corporation that gives special grants and she can get you to the right person, but not if you don't ask!

b. Don't put all your eggs in one basket. Successful fundraisers use all available opportunities including: private donor solicitation, foundation proposals, corporate requests, local, county, state and federal government proposals and fund raising events. Please note that fundraising events typically have the smallest return on investment. Use them sparingly and focus them on "friend-raising" rather than fundraising. ALWAYS keep good lists of who attends your events. They are a great source for later solicitation.

2. Asking in the right way

a. Most foundations and public sources have specific guidelines for proposal content. Many will not even consider proposals that do not comply with their format. Call or write to ask for the format and an annual report. A number of foundations in New York/New Jersey have developed a common application form. You can find a copy, along with other great information, on the Internet at the [Foundation Center](#) and [The Grantsmanship Center](#).

b. Private donor solicitation is an art form when done well. Whether by mail or in person, make sure that you are asking the right person, that the right person is doing the asking and that your "story" is clear, crisp and ends in a specific request for a donation. Small local "teas" given by community friends can raise money quickly and easily, especially if the host/hostess invites friends and assumes responsibility for organizing the event. Whenever possible personalize either the story or the person making the request. Expect to take no for an answer sometimes and do it graciously. Don't forget to ask if they know of someone else who might be interested. Careful list building is hard work that always pays off in the end.

c. There are traditional good times to ask for private donations—Christmas, before and after April 15th (a reminder of the value of tax deductions) and important organizational anniversary years (5th, 10th, 25th etc.). If your story has a particular time or topic emphasis you may want to solicit funding before a related holiday. Many organizations make good use of Mother's Day, Valentine's Day etc. by linking those days to their organization's goals. I know of one organization that sent out personalized Thanksgiving Day cards to major donors and volunteers. The card did not ask for money but it was very noticeable and had a strong response in the form of

increased donations. More than one person noted that it was the only Thanksgiving Day card they received.

3. Improving the appeal

Whether for written or in-person solicitation, make sure that your “story” contains the following:

a. **What difference will this work make?** Private and public funders are now looking for “outcomes”. It is less important (although still of some value) to prove how many people will receive benefit. It is more important to concretely describe the benefit they will receive. What will the person seeing/experiencing your work gain by the experience? Think in terms of what they will be able to do or be after the experience that they could not before. Will they be able to act more peacefully? Will they be able to show compassion in an area that traditionally lacks compassion? Most nonprofits have a very hard time describing the difference they make. Many are afraid to commit to making a real difference. The reality is that those organizations who are able to clearly express their outcomes are having far better success in attracting private and public funds.

b. **For whom?** Describe the population who will most benefit from your work and for whom your work is designed. This is your primary customer (the funder is providing a means to getting to the customer). Be clear about how you will access this primary customer. Saying that a program is designed for schoolchildren is different than laying out the plan for getting them to come. Do both!!

c. **At what cost?** Art organizations have an undeserved (sometimes!) reputation as lacking fiscal accountability. Put in the time to assess realistically how much it will (or does) cost to produce the work. Budget realistically and ask for an amount slightly higher than you think they can give (good donor prospecting will help you make an informed decision). Make a clear link between what it costs and the amount you are requesting. What will their money buy—scholarships for 7 children, one full production, costume rental for one night?

Fundraising is hard work that needs specific attention and priority time. Your great idea deserves to be seen, heard and shared!

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Excerpts from the introduction to a sample grant proposal written for the FQA board by Regina Podhorin Zilinski in 1996:

[Our] commitment has led us to support much that is creative in public life, education, business, and concern for the oppressed. It has also led us to oppose practices and institutions that result in violence and exploitation in the world around us.” —Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Faith and Practice (lastest version)

...Historically, those skilled in the arts felt that their artistry was not a major force in Quaker life. Artists are stereotypically assumed to be self-seeking, using their art as an alternative form of self-expression. The Fellowship of Quakers in the Arts sees their work as self-giving through a special form of ministry that brings together their creativity and their passion for social justice...by becoming a professional society based on the Quaker testimonies of nonviolence, simplicity, equality, integrity, and community. These “testimonies” reflect a common set of deeply held, historically rooted attitudes and modes of living in the world. Through these testimonies, Friends strive for unity and integrity of inner and outer life, both in living with themselves and others, and in living in the larger world....

With violence growing at alarming rates, a society that is reeling from rampant consumerism, a frightening increase in racial/cultural separatism and a world where community is valued but inaccessible behind locked doors and alarm systems--these universal values are needed more than ever. Society is calling for a new way to share these values and an opportunity to discuss their meaning in individual lives....The Fellowship of Quakers in the Arts also hopes to provide alternatives and engage in a dialogue about solutions to these pressing social problems. It is this act of creating a living testimony that will encourage others to experience differences and value the variety of creation, while breaking the isolation that these differences have caused.

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