

In Search of Unicorns: Finding and Hiring Outside Grantwriters Part 2

June 17, 2008

In Part 1 of this article, Wes Mukoyama of Yu-Ai Kai asked the question: "As a small agency . . . how do I look for a grantwriter? I have talked to a few who either want to be paid by the hour or receive a percentage of the grant. Any suggestions?" We discussed why hiring outside (contract) grantwriters seems to work so seldom - either for the community nonprofit or for the grantwriter. We also suggested two additional choices: hiring support staff to free up your program managers and executive director to write grants, and growing your own grantwriters.

In this issue's Part 2, we'll discuss how to find grantwriters, select them, how much to pay them and what kinds of payment arrangements to choose. (And in Unicorns Found, we profile two of these elusive creatures.)

A. How to find one

1. Use your internal channels first: ask board members, volunteers and friends if they are grantwriters, know grantwriters, or are interested in becoming grantwriters.

2. Call executive directors in your field for suggestions. "We're looking to expand our grantwriting team by working with a very part-time grantwriter. Can you suggest someone? What did she do for you? How much did you pay her? What advice would you have for me if we decide to work with her?"

3. Call recently retired executive directors and development directors. "I always admired your work at the YWCA. Here at the Bicycle Coalition we're talking with some of the same funders that you worked with and we thought that bicycling might be a cause of interest to you. I know you haven't put out a shingle announcing that you're doing grantwriting, but you've got the skills, you could make some money and it might turn out to be great for bicyclists in our town."

4. Go to networking sessions of fundraisers, such as the Association of Fundraising Professionals (AFP) or the Foundation Center and announce that you're looking to hire a grantwriter. Many of the attendees will be fundraising consultants.

5. Ask through channels such as Young Nonprofit Professionals Network, your LinkedIn or MySpace connections. "I'm looking for a grantwriter who is familiar with and committed to health access. Get involved with social justice health care and make \$55/hour. If that's you or you know someone, please send writing sample and rate to ____."

6. Call the local technical assistance provider, United Way, a nonprofit association, or other group and ask for suggestions. Some local associations may have listservs where you can post a query.

7. You can try resource sites such as craigslist, Idealist and others. In the research for this article very few of the people we contacted through these channels called us back.

B. How to interview and select a grantwriter

1. Have the right person in the organization call prospects. Ideally the executive director or whoever will be working with the grantwriter should make the calls. Whether and how they call you back will be part of how you assess their fit with your organization.

2. Prepare your questions before you call: One way to start - "You might know that we're an organization that produces films and accompanying educational curricula on discrimination against gay and lesbian people. We currently receive about five foundation grants each year totaling about \$220,000. We're looking for someone to help us by writing two or three additional foundation grants and we hear that you're wonderful. Is this something you'd be interested in talking more about?"

3. Meet in person after having reviewed writing samples. In the interview, pay as much attention to the questions that the grantwriter asks as to the answers he gives to your questions. Does he ask about your relationships with the funding targets and talk about how to incorporate those into the grantwriting process? Does she need materials that you don't have already and would be time-consuming to create? Does he seem more interested in how your organization needs to change than in helping you get successful grants as you are? Is this person sensitive to your constituents and how to portray and discuss them? (Example: does the grantwriter understand the difference between "a person in a wheelchair" and "a person who uses a wheelchair"?) Do you feel comfortable revealing your fears and warts to this person?

4. Ask for two references and call them. "How much of the proposal was written by the grantwriter and how much was drawn from your own materials? Was there the right amount of back-and-forth? What did you like best about this person's work? Worst? Do you have reservations about hiring them again? How much did you pay them and what was the fee based on? If I hire this person, what advice would you have for me?"

5. Propose an initial try-out project perhaps a short proposal for corporate support of a program for which you already have a long government proposal and contract. Agree on a fixed fee and timeline for this work.

6. Be careful with big promises: "Your organization is perfect for Bill Gates." The hope for a big grant and the desire to believe in its possibility can make it easy to let go of one's better judgment.

C. How much - and how - to pay a grantwriter

Contingency: Community nonprofits often hope to find a grantwriter who will work on contingency – she will only get paid if the grant is successful. Grantwriters seldom agree to this, because there are so many variables other than the proposal quality that go into whether the grant is awarded. [Contingency fees combined with percentage compensation are often attacked as unethical when a fundraiser might be tempted to ask a major donor for a \$100K gift this year instead of a \$1 million bequest. Grantwriting is a different situation.]

Hourly: Most grantwriters charge by the hour. Rates range from zero for volunteer grantwriting to \$150/hour or more. The experienced freelance grantwriters we interviewed averaged around \$65 - \$85/hour. For a first-time engagement, you should agree on a range of hours at a certain rate, such as 6-8 hours @ \$45/hour, including one hour of meeting time at the beginning. It may not be easy for a grantwriter to know how much time a proposal will take.

Percentage of grant proposal: Proposals for multimillion dollar grants are typically longer and much more involved than proposals for \$15,000 grants. As a result, it's understandable that grantwriters would want to be paid more for larger proposals. On the other hand, since the grantwriter's fee can't come out of the grant award (except in rare circumstances), percentage payment doesn't have the same rationale as it does, for instance, in retail sales. Instead, agree on a range of hours it will take and the hourly rate. For example, a large, multimillion dollar government proposal may be bid at 35 hours @ \$75/hour and an agreement reached where the proposal will be written for \$2,275.

Should you have the grantwriter research targets as well?

The all-too-common experience for community nonprofits is that the grantwriter identifies foundations and corporations that may look like a fit according to their official guidelines, but are such long shots that paying to have proposals written to them turns out to be a waste of funds.

A better approach is for the community nonprofit to identify some potential targets (whether foundation, corporation or government) and ask the grantwriter to do phone (and web) research to explore how best to approach the target and whether it's worth it. Ask him to pay attention to other prospects that might come up in the course of his research. But unless you and the grantwriter have worked together for awhile, don't pay for a web or library search.

D. The Contract

Many experienced grantwriters will have contracts that they will suggest to you. Be sure the following elements are included:

- Services and products to be delivered, preferably identifying the target institutions and the type of grant that will be sought

-

Deadlines for drafts and final documents, and a first check-in date

-
Materials, resources and time from your agency that the grantwriter will require

-
Fee and when it will be paid

-
Other expenses: agree that the grantwriter cannot incur any other expenses for which you will reimburse without your prior, written, specific approval

-
Confidentiality: an agreement that the grantwriter will not share information about the proposal or your organization with others

-
Independent contractor status: confirmation that the arrangement is one of independent contractor (not employee) and meets the governmental definitions for independent contractor status

-
Ownership of documents: any materials developed will be the agency's property

-
Termination of agreement: how either of you can back out

Sample grantwriter contracts

- GrantWriterUSA
- FairyGrantmother

search for a grantwriter is worth the effort--finding a person who produces good proposals efficiently and who represents your organization well in writing will maximize your grantwriting efforts and benefit you, your organization and your constituents.

This article is from Blue Avocado, a free online magazine for nonprofit people. Subscribe and see archives at www.blueavocado.org