

Should You Submit the Same Proposal to More than One Funder – at the Same Time?

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Last fall, a colleague on a listserv that I subscribe to posted a commonly asked question. Is it wise to submit the same project simultaneously to several foundations? If so, and you are blessed with awards from more than one funder, what would happen if you can't double the project?

While the words have varied through the years, I have heard this question asked many times. Sometimes it's been asked by my coworkers and supervisors. Other times, it's brought up by other grant professionals. But the questions all share two things in common. The first is that program staff and administrators always want to hedge their bets by submitting multiple proposals in hopes that at least one funder will award a contract. The second is that few people consider the possibility that both funders will want to support the program.

As a practical matter, I have in fact submitted the same program proposal to more than one funding source at the same time. But just as when submitting any grant proposal, I lead a discussion about the possible funding levels that might be awarded – and we develop plans.

Plan A – What will we do if we receive only fifty percent of our requested budget?

It is always wise to think about how your organization will handle a fifty percent award. After all, this is a common reality that you will be faced with throughout your professional career.

Thus, I have the team discuss what we would do if only one funder awards us just half of what we requested. I take our grant team through the budget and ask them to identify the “must have” components – the ones that are absolutely essential. The task at hand is to develop a bare-bones program budget. If after discussing the situation, we find that our proposed budget is actually the minimum amount needed to implement a workable program, I ask the staff to go back and consider what else should have been included in the budget to optimize its effectiveness.

Over the years, I have found that oftentimes our staff will have initially already developed a bare bones budget. Early in my career, this confused me. But then I came to realize that many program staff members are leery of asking me (the grant writer) to find “too much” grant money. They would rather propose minimal program plans that ask for more because they fear failing to receive any funds.

If this is the case, I ask the staff to tell me what best practices or strategies would strengthen the program. I ask them to tell me what should be added to the program to ensure that it is a comprehensive plan with a likelihood of creating even greater client outcomes. Based on their answers and input, we rework our budget request. We add the additional components that will strengthen our plans and their expenses.

Note that at times, it is not simply a matter of adding more services or enhancements. Sometimes, our staff will suggest that we propose to divide the job responsibilities between two part-time professional staff members. Each of these individual positions can then assigned half of the client caseload and specific job assignments. Then, our budget will reflect the hiring of two .50 FTE individuals that can implement one-half of the program if full funds are not awarded. But if full funding is available, we can hire one full-time person with benefits (based on a lower single full-time salary versus a higher part-time professional wage for part-time staff).

After we have considered all the options and have revised our budget, we are ready to submit our program proposal and budget request. We are confident that if we receive less than our full budget request, we will be able identify the key components that are absolutely necessary for a partial implementation. And we are certain that we will be able to facilitate outcome successes for our clients (even if there are fewer of them than we had hoped for).

Plan B – What will we do if we receive partial funding from more than one funding source?

Since we're already taken the steps described for Plan A, we are prepared. We can confidently accept both awards. We will notify both funders of the awards, sign the contracts, and carefully document which expenses are being charged to each of the contracts.

It's a win-win situation. We have received our full budget request, and our funders are assured that they are investing in a program that others feel is as valuable to the community as they do.

Plan C – What will we do if we receive full funding from more than one funding source?

If you are blessed with a double award, your organization has two basic options:

Option #1 – Double the Size of the Program

If possible, you might consider doubling the size of your staff positions, the number of clients to be served, the number of program services available, and the number and level of client outcomes to be achieved. If this is the decision that your organization makes, you will simply need to notify the funders of your double awards and share with them your plan to expand the program.

Option #2 – Extend the Time Frame for the Program’s Implementation

Doubling your program size is not always feasible. For example, if you have included a full-time project director in your budget request, you will most certainly not need to hire two such positions. And you might not have a large enough target population base from which you can draw program participants. Additionally, you might not have enough space to house twice the staff or twice the number of anticipated participants.

So if doubling the program’s size is neither desirable nor feasible, you should consider requesting that one funder allow you to extend your program time period to reflect the double funding that is now available.

In my opinion, most often, this is the best option. And in fact, it is one that I have used when the amazing happened and my organization was awarded two fully funded contracts. My first step was to contact the funder with whom we had the closest relationship. I shared news of our great fortune and asked if we could use their award to fund the second year of our pilot program. They were thrilled. The funder’s staff member told me that they felt like they had won the lottery too. Why? Because the program that they were so excited to support was guaranteed to have two years of full funding while my organization developed its sustainability plan.

But before you decide which funding source to approach, you need to remember that government funders and contracts are much less flexible than types of funders. Therefore, if one of the awarded contracts is from a government agency, I almost always would recommend that you accept this award first. Then talk to the foundation or corporate grantor about your options. Non-governmental agencies are much more flexible and able to respond to changing conditions than local, state or federal staff members.

Option #3 – Ask the foundation or corporate giving staff to allow you to use the funds to support another of your agency’s programs.

Although it is unlikely that a funder will allow you to use allocated funds for a different program, if this is the only option available (other than #4 below), it is worth trying. After all, the worst thing that the funder can say is no – and you’re really not risking much by asking. But be prepared to suggest a program that is very similar or complementary to the one that they originally offered you a contract to support. It is never wise to attempt to gain their approval on a totally different type of program – especially if it is outside of the field of interest.

Option #4 – Decline one of the grant contracts.

Fortunately, I have never had to resort to using this option. However, it is one that every organization submitting multiple proposals simultaneously should realize might happen. After all, a funder is never obligated to modify its contractual terms and conditions.

In Conclusion

It has always seem odd to me that funders don't address the issue of multiple submissions in their program announcements or guidelines. They have clear and well defined rules for nearly everything other possibility, but none that address the probability that a grant applicant might want to increase their odds of winning a grant contract from more than one funder.

So while there are no rules preventing multiple submissions, I will continue to apply to more than one funder. However, I will also notify my potential funders of my pending requests. After all, trust is a key component of my organization's relationships with its funders – and trust is built on knowing that we will each tell each other the truth. Besides, it's important to remember that funders talk to each other and it is best that they hear from you about the double submissions.

So feel free to submit more than one application for your programs. Just be prepared to be honest with the funders and to be prepared for the possibility that you will win more than one grant award.