When Grantmakers Come Calling

By Joel Hoekstra

It's no secret when District 202 development director Melissa Conway is preparing for a visit from a philanthropic funder. Of course, the staff of 202, a seven-year-old Minneapolis drop-in center for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth ages 21 and under, is briefed in advance. But even the teens who operate 202's espresso bar and organize its programs sense that something's up: "Youth always know when I'm doing a site visit, because I'm more dressed up than I usually am," Conway says with a chuckle. "It really threw me for a loop once when a foundation representative showed up in jeans."

There's often some element of unpredictability in site visits, but for the most part, Conway says, she enjoys watching funders respond to the 202 scene. "Site visits are always sort of nerve-wracking, but I love them, because we're a youth center," Conway confesses. "It's fun to bring people in and have them see the impact we're making. I like sharing the stories of individual youth – it's mostly about stories, which you don't get to include in a grant proposal."

Most funders agree. Site visits provide them with a feel and understanding of an agency or programs that rarely come across completely in a written grant proposal. "There's only so much you can glean from an organization on paper," says Louis Hohlfeld, program officer for The McKnight Foundation in Minneapolis. "You have to get a sense of how the organization is run, who the people are, what the facility looks like."

And contrary to the beliefs of some program directors, site visits aren't just a white-glove inspection, says Donna Sherlock, executive director of the Minnesota Women's Foundation. "You can have a great program run by a mediocre grantwriter or a mediocre program and a fabulous grantwriter," she explains. "Sometimes the passion of the individuals involved -- their vision, their connections with people -- don't come through in the written proposal. If you, as a funder, don't make the visit, you might miss a great funding opportunity."

But since site visits are tied to funding, it's easy to see why many organizations feel under the microscope when the foundation representative comes calling. "One misconception is that we're "suits," says Ron McKinley, manager of charitable contributions for The St. Paul Companies, "that we're going to be critical and prescriptive, that this is an evaluation and we're trying to find the dirt." But many foundation and charitable-giving program employees have spent a considerable portion of their careers on the other side of the table -- founding, managing or working for nonprofit agencies.

"Foundation folks are looking to make good grants," Hohlfeld says. "We're not looking to withhold funds."

Site visits are a single but critical step in most agencies' attempts to secure funding and implement programming. As with every step in that process -- from proposal writing to hiring employees -- preparation and planning are key to improving an agency's chances for success in obtaining a grant. Most funders say there's nothing in particular a nonprofit can do to guarantee that a site visit results in funding; often, the people doing the site visit only make recommendations about particular programs, while others decide who ultimately receives funding. But grantmaking personnel interviewed for this article offered several rules of thumb for agencies readying for a site visit.

Get the Details Straight

Every site visit begins with a phone call. After a funder has reviewed a proposal and decided to make a site visit, a representative generally contacts the applicant agency's executive director to schedule a visit. Be flexible about the appointment -- funders often must complete several site visits within a brief time frame -- but choose a time that also suits your calendar. Be sure to ask if there is any further information you should gather before the funder arrives. Does she have specific questions about the proposal or your agency? How long will the visit last, and who would the funder like to meet: program staff, board members, clients? And how many funding representatives will be coming?

Take time to get plenty of information in advance. That will make the site visit more worthwhile for both you and the funder. Also, don't forget to give careful directions on finding your agency: "The biggest challenge for me about site visits is how to get there!" Hohlfeld adds jokingly. "I get lost about half the time."

Prepare, Prepare, Prepare

If a funder indicates ahead of time that they're interested in a particular aspect of your program or agency, you should become an expert on that subject. Or, if another staff member can speak more eloquently and informatively regarding the matter, ask them to put together a brief report or sit in on a portion of your meeting. Be prepared to answer both general and more detailed questions about the particular program, including additional funding prospects, the scope of services, staffing needs and capacity, and community demand.

Executive directors should also be prepared to discuss their financial statements. These reports serve as a litmus test of an organization's capacity to carry out its aims. Executive directors who are not trained accountants would be wise to spend some time with their chief financial officer before meeting with the funder. In fact, it may be wise to have the "numbers guru" on call during the meeting.

Likewise, be sure to review the annual report of the foundation whose representative you're meeting with, or visit its Web site if one exists. You'll likely uncover some additional information about the foundation's funding strategies and priorities.

Talk and Listen Carefully

"Site visits are where the real connections happen," says Karen Starr, senior program officer for the Otto Bremer Foundation. After putting everyone at ease, Starr likes to cultivate an atmosphere for discussion during site visits in which everyone contributes equally and feels free to suggest alternative answers to the problem at hand. "Site visits are about creating a relationship of partners, and it's very hard to have such a relationship if the foundation and the grantee aren't speaking the same language," Starr says. "Clear communication requires face-to-face contact."

The St. Paul Companies' McKinley keeps his site visits short (an hour to an hour and a half, at the longest), so naturally he's intent on drawing out the enthusiasm of the program's planners. "The biggest thing for me is to give people 25 to 40 minutes up front to talk about their organization and programs," McKinley says. "And usually, if there are gaps in my understanding of the program, the opportunity will come up during that time to ask my questions."

Occasionally, you may suspect that the funder hasn't read your proposal thoroughly. Or that, in his scramble to pack a dozen site visits into just a few days, he's gotten some details mixed up in his questions. "Don't be afraid to step in and offer an overview of the program," Sherlock says. A sketch or synopsis proffered in a polite tone is often welcome. "I think it's perfectly fine to say, 'I know you read hundreds of proposals, so let me just give you a quick overview of what we're doing and why it's important,'" she says.

Skip the Show

It may be tempting to try to dazzle funders with entertainment, presentations and firsthand testimonials indicating how your program has impacted clients' lives in immeasurable ways. Don't succumb. "I usually try to discourage the dog-and-pony show. If there is some aspect of the program I want to see, I'll tell them about it," Sherlock says. "If I come out and someone's got a prearranged performance, it might be entertaining and interesting, but I'm not going to get my questions answered."

Other funders may prefer to mingle with clients. McKinley, for example, recently visited Baltimore to conduct site visits for The St. Paul Companies newly expanded philanthropic forays in the area. While visiting the Maryland Historical Society, McKinley had a chance to slip into the back of an exhibit room where young public school children were learning about the role African Americans had played in developing the port and city of Baltimore. "I spent three minutes watching the teacher and kids," McKinley says. "It was a completely interactive classroom. Hands were up, and the kids were asking questions left and right. You could feel the energy. It was different from a lot of other history programs I've seen."

Take it from the seasoned experts: such moments can't be staged! If your program doesn't spark such interaction, don't try to fabricate it. And if the tug-at-your-heartstrings approach doesn't work, neither does too much salesmanship. Hohlfeld describes his worst site visit experiences as "a pre-engineered series of presentations by different staff members that are best characterized as hard sell. They tell me little more than what I learned in the proposal."

Be Honest

Whether it's the particulars of your proposal or your staffing or financial situation, be up-front about the challenges your agency faces. Experienced funders can tell when you're skirting an issue, even if they don't know why. If you're honest with them, they're more likely to empathize with your situation or suggest solutions than to blackball your program.

Your agency's needs may be broader than the specific proposal you've put forth, and it may be helpful for the funder to know that, says Sherlock. An agency may have financial troubles or need board training. "I try to open up the doors," Sherlock says. "I try to let them know everything doesn't have to be perfect. As a funder, you need to let applicants know that you understand the realities of small community agencies. We understand that you can't take care of everything at once."

If an agency does have hidden problems, Hohlfeld says, they usually come to light in his conversations with community members outside the organization. He encourages agencies to talk openly about their challenges, financial or otherwise. "Usually we can help," he says.

Always Follow Up

Take a moment at the end of every site visit to make a checklist of any issues the funder asked you to follow up on. Were there reports you should fax or send? Perhaps just a dollar figure that you'd forgotten to factor into the budget? If a funder requests such items, double-check the timeline: Does she need those figures in two days or two weeks? And in a formal report or simply over the phone?

Don't overdo it. Generating extra paper may not have the type of positive impact you want. "I remember a final report that was a one-inch, three-ring binder full of articles and newspaper clippings," McKinley says. "To be honest, I'm not able to give that much material the attention it deserves. It's better to be brief, and highlight successes."

And even though you should follow up with any additional information requests, give funders time to process your information. Non-emergency phone calls and letters may not necessarily be answered the same week after the visit. "During a grant cycle, it may not be possible for me to return calls as quickly as I would like," McKinley explains. "I try to return all calls within three days. But because the volume of work can be consuming, I ask applicants to be as patient as possible so that no one is pressuring the other."

Ask About Your Chances

It's only natural to want to know what a funder is thinking as the site visit wraps up, so go ahead and ask, the experts say. Although the final decisions regarding funding are rarely left to the foundation representative alone ("The grant decisions are not in the hands of the staff," says Otto Bremer's Starr. "We operate under the assumption that a site visit doesn't mean they will get funding"), he or she is likely to give you a sense of what your chances are. "I don't mind someone asking for feedback," says Sherlock. "Ask for suggestions. Ask about your chances. I'll give honest answers."

In fact, even if you don't receive funding from that particular donor, you may get a better sense of why not if you inquire as the site visit concludes. "I can't tell an agency that it's guaranteed to get funding, but I will let people know if I see a red flag," says Hohlfeld.

Relax

Starr claims the worst site visit she endured was a scripted show-and-tell. After being herded into a room and given no introductions, Starr and her fellow funders found themselves listening to letters of recommendation being read aloud. "There was no interaction. Literally the person in charge of the program read from a script," Starr says. "Clearly, that was not a way to begin a relationship."

Being alert is important, of course. But anxiety and nervousness get in the way of a good dialogue. "The more nervous people get, the less rapport happens," says Hohlfeld. "If people are more laid back, the connection between us is better. Most program officers are honestly there to find out about your program. Not to offer you instructions."

At bottom, most site visits are about cultivating a bond between funders and nonprofit agencies. And in the best of these relationships, there's a long-term commitment and long-term benefits. "A site visit gives us an opportunity to create a relationship with grantees," says Sherlock. "And if we look at a grant as not the end of a relationship but as the beginning of a relationship, in which we're going to grow and learn and make changes for the greater good, then it's a vital part of the grantmaking process."

The fruit of that relationship, says Hohlfeld, is progress towards a common goal. "Enter into dialogue with your investor," he advises. "You're both interested in helping the community. That's the bottom line-to help people in the community. And as the funder and the service provider, you each have different roles in that help. We're all in the same basic business."

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