

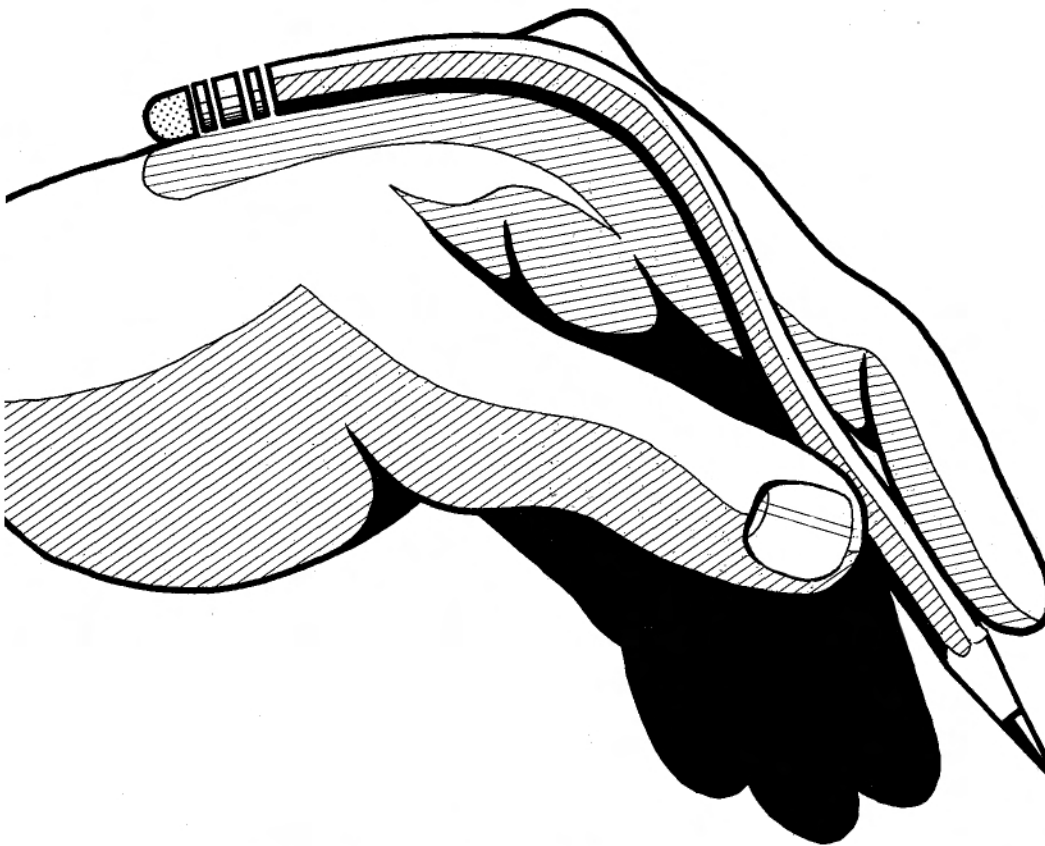
Bill Somerville, executive director of the Philanthropic Ventures Foundation in Oakland, California, has drawn on his experiences reviewing proposals to prepare an incisive listing of “where proposals fail” that includes clear instructions for writing better proposals and dealing more professionally with potential funding sources.

Somerville’s advice is basic and conjures images of a foundation executive predisposed to support valuable projects but confronted with a steady stream of proposals and funding requests that are their own worst enemy—that are seemingly calculated to present the project in the worst possible light.

His suggestions indicate that brevity, clarity and a realistic budget are the mother’s milk of success in seeking funding, but each of the items on the list represents a specific mistake he has encountered and thus a common error to be avoided.

The Proposal

- Be creative and positive, not problem oriented; what is your idea?
- Be realistic; don’t promise global changes from your efforts.
- Be factual and specific; don’t talk in generalities or in emotional terms. Be able to substantiate all statements in your proposal, otherwise don’t make them.
- Present a proposal for something specific; don’t send in a shopping list, since this is asking the funder to determine your priorities, and don’t send in a tome with a request for the funder to “take any portion of it.”
- Be respectful of what you are asking for; don’t say, “It’s just a small amount” or “I only need...”
- Use language for lay people; no abbreviations, initials, jargon or verbs turned into nouns (e.g., “prioritize”).



WHERE PROPOSALS
FAIL

*A Foundation Executive’s Basic List of
What to Do and Not Do When
Requesting Funding*

By **BILL SOMERVILLE**

Illustration by Bill Allen

- Approve all proposals from your organization; don't let subordinates send out proposals under their names only.
- Do funding research for your proposal; don't just blanket every foundation with the request. Make your request fit the foundation's range of giving; don't ask each foundation for the total amount. Ask for things that foundation funds.
- Be clear in how you will operate; don't say or imply that money alone will solve the problem.
- Submit a finished proposal; don't ask the funder to review a draft. Send in proposals that are completed. Did you sign it? is it legible? are the enclosures there? is there a budget? is there enough postage?
- Present your proposal without encasing it in plastic, binders or binding; the funder needs to copy it.
- Ask for things you need; don't include items you already have, and don't ask for retroactive funding.
- Treat the funder with respect and respect yourself; don't grovel; don't say, "If you don't fund us we will go out of business," since this implies the funder is responsible for your actions.
- Do it yourself; teach your own staff about fund raising, but if you hire a development person or a consultant, stay on top of it; proposals exclusively written by development people usually don't make sense because that person isn't familiar with the project.

Credibility

- Give details about who will do what. Give evidence of your ability to undertake the program, the past experience of your agency in this area or of your personnel; don't assume anything.
- Show that you know your field and what else is being done; don't say your project is unique unless it really is.
- If you are undertaking something new or for which you have no

previous experience, then give some evidence of why the funder should have confidence that you can do it.

- Plan ahead; don't call the funder with a request for immediate money unless it is an unforeseen emergency.
- Give evaluation evidence of past work, not general statements of how many people were affected.

Budgets

- Make detailed budgets, not general categories; don't hide anything. Be able to substantiate your budget figures.
- Have budgets that anyone can understand; don't submit fiscal items that are so customized that the funder can't understand them.
- Give evidence of future support or a realistic appraisal of future fund raising; vague statements such as "We'll go to corporations" do not substantiate your future prospects.
- Be honest; don't ask for short term money when your future is uncertain; don't turn the funder into an ambulance driver to the rescue.

Communicating

- Use the telephone; don't ask, "May I come in and talk to you?" without explaining what you have in mind.
- When you call a funder, be organized; don't use the funder to motivate you to organize your thoughts.
- When calling a funder be specific; don't ask for advice as a subterfuge for having a conversation.
- Call the funder yourself; don't have your secretary make your inquiries, and never have an assistant say, "One moment for the executive director who wishes to speak with you."
- Remember telephone etiquette; a funder will try to return calls, but if your line remains busy, it is not the funder's responsibility to get back to you. Try not to use the phrase "He or she is in a meeting"

repeatedly, since it gives the impression that the caller is being undervalued or that meetings are more important than dealing with the public. Avoid asking who is calling and then saying that the person being called is not in, since this gives the impression that the person is "not in" for the caller.

- In an interview with a potential funder, take notes and be aware of the questions being asked; they show where your proposal is weak and whether the funder understands your request. The interview should be a learning experience.
- Use the cover letter to its full extent, summarizing the request in a concise way, and don't ramble or miniaturize the total proposal.
- Make letters of intent succinct; don't let them ramble to multiple pages. Describe who you are, what is proposed and how much is needed.
- Take full responsibility for your proposal; don't say, "I am writing as you suggested," implying some sort of endorsement by the funder.
- Know whom you are dealing with; don't write "Dear Friend" or "To Whom it May Concern" or "Executive Director" or leave out the salutation altogether.

Afterwords

- Be open to having someone say "no" to you; don't have a brittle ego or one that is attached to the proposal.
- Keep the funder informed of your work; don't let the next time the funder sees you be when you are asking for second-year funding (one of the best informing documents is the minutes from your board meetings).
- Requests for continuing funding are just as important as the original request; don't merely submit a letter asking for more money.
- Know the difference between community and private foundations; a geographic name indicates a community foundation with a limited geographic giving area.