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Steps for Developing Effective Grant Writing Workshops

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Steps for Developing Effective Grant Writing Workshops

Abstract

Grants can be an important source of funding for new and existing businesses. Yet most business owners have no experience in grant writing and find it intimidating. In this article, we identify steps based on our experiences that Extension educators can take to develop and deliver a successful grant writing workshop.

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Introduction

Helping our clients through the process of writing grant proposals to obtain external funding for new projects and ventures is an increasingly important part of our work in Extension. Our experiences are associated with grants related to assistance for new business ventures for start-up or operating funding. The Value Added Producer Grants (USDA Cooperative Services, Rural Development) and the Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) grants (USDA, Cooperative State Research Extension Education Service) are two examples of grant funding for new business development.

There are many other types of grants out there. The Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) grants can be an important source of funding for farmers and ranchers following sustainable agriculture practices. Grants for energy conservation and efficiency represent another example. Many of our clients will be interested in submitting an application for a worthy cause, but unfortunately, most of them have no experience in grant writing. This generates a timely and important opportunity for Extension programming.

In this article we identify the steps that you can take to develop and deliver a successful program to assist clients in writing grant proposals. These steps have evolved from our collective experiences in offering grant writing workshops. Although the examples noted here focus on grants to develop and expand value added businesses, the points are appropriate for all grant writing areas.

Steps to Developing and Delivering a Program for Clients

1. Anticipate the program announcement.

The granting agency will release an announcement about the program. These are called various names, including "RFP" (Request for Proposals) and "NOFA" (Notice of Funds Available). Look for these announcements, and even try to anticipate them.

2. Set the agenda.

The NOFA/RFP will include the due date for proposals and usually allows little time to plan and orchestrate your workshop. If you have the luxury of anticipating the announcement, get ahead of the curve on planning. This will prevent a full-out sprint to get a program developed, speakers arranged, and all other logistics in a very short time-frame.

The agenda for your workshop might include:

- Introductions
 - A representative from the granting agency
 - They can talk about the grant requirements, the review process and selection criteria.
- Review of program logistics
 - Layout the critical dates, components to be included in the proposal, and other specific logistical issues.
- How to write a successful grant proposal
 - Have a qualified person discuss what it takes to write a competitive proposal.
 - Also, consider handing out references like Marshall, Johnson, and Fulton (2006) and Philbrick (1990).
- Question and answer period
 - The audience will have lots of questions that cover many topics. Allow a solid half hour or more for these questions.

It is important to note that participants will ask questions all along the way. Allow ample time for each speaker to field questions. This time can range from one fourth to one half of the speaker's time allowed. By allowing for Q&A throughout, if your speakers have to leave early, they can still answer a good portion of the questions people will have.

3. Get speakers committed.

Be certain to coordinate with the granting agency representative (e.g., for the Value Added Producer Grants [USDA Cooperative Services, Rural Development], the appropriate representative is the USDA Rural Cooperative Specialist in your state). They like to be actively involved in helping grantees submit better proposals. Their role in the workshop is to lay out the proposal parameters and criteria for selection. Participants find it useful to hear the guidelines and requirements from the people who actually administer the grant. Other speakers that you may want to include are technical writers, someone who has reviewed grants (hopefully for the program people are applying to), and someone to review the nuts and bolts of building the proposal.

4. Arrange for partnerships.

Work with the people who can help you promote and deliver your workshop. For example, use distance learning sites to provide the workshop around your state by working with other Extension personnel or agencies. Other programs or people you might consider partnering with include your state's Small Business Development Centers, rural development programs, etc. Working with those outside the university system can build lots of social capital and possibly synergies between programs.

5. Set the date.

The workshop will take 2 to 3 hours and can be scheduled for a morning, afternoon, or evening. Try to set the workshop for 3 to 4 weeks before the due date of a proposal. With the deadline that close, you have a great teaching moment.

Obviously, setting the date can occur before steps 2 to 4. However, it is our experience that the program can be planned and put on hold until the NOFA/RFP triggers its implementation.

6. Advertise.

Get the word out! We found that e-mail is an excellent way to advertise. We generated an eye-catching notice that was in the body of the e-mail (not an attachment). We sent that to contacts that we had and asked anyone who received it to forward it along. Word of mouth and the forwarded e-mails worked great to bring in an audience.

Don't forget the press release--especially to agricultural-based periodicals. Work with your Extension communications group to craft and distribute it. Also, try personalizing the press release or follow it up with a phone call to key media sources.

7. Encourage pre-registration.

If possible, get people to pre-register for the event. Pre-registration allows for adapting to the size of the demand (versus cramming 200 people in a room that holds 150).

8. Follow up.

Offer to assist the participants by reviewing a draft of their proposal. They love the help. In reality only a few people will actually take you up on it because most people work up to the deadline and won't leave enough time to solicit advice from you. However, by offering you show that you care, and that seems to go a long way. It is very appropriate to set some parameters on your offer to review proposals, such as a draft deadline and feedback date.

Our Experiences and Benefits

Our experience with grant writing workshops has been very positive. This is an area where the need is great and the audience is keen to learn. It provides a great teaching moment, especially if the workshop is just before the submission deadline. You help build a collective knowledge and skill set in the community, which gets better and bigger with each grant opportunity and workshop.

The result is better grant applications--and more of them. Ideally that will translate into money coming into your community, helping to empower the region. And the program is another way for stakeholders to learn about your overall Extension program. Finally, people, programs, and agencies are usually eager to join the effort because this is an important and timely topic in which to be involved.

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