

Think like a marketer when writing a grant proposal

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Many years ago, the Ramada hotel chain had just completed a sweeping upgrade of its facilities nationwide, and its advertising celebrated all the improvements. But Ramada was #2 in a market then dominated by Holiday Inn; and we marketers knew that property fix-ups weren't going to be enough. To achieve lasting growth, we would have to identify a key segment of the market, dissect their needs, provide the right services, and show that Ramada would serve them better than anyone else.

After lots of research, we decided that frequent business travelers were an underserved and underappreciated group. From that same research, we also found that their most memorable hotel experiences were the bad ones—long waits at check-in, no hot water, room A/C not working, slow room service, and so on.

So we developed a plan that defined our target market and its needs. We set measurable goals, devised ways to achieve them, and how to measure success. The plan also included a budget and context for future evolution of the strategy.

The key component was advertising that used humorous vignettes about travelers enduring poor service in other (unnamed) hotels, and promising that Ramada was uniquely attuned to business travelers' needs, and would take special care of them. Almost overnight, reservations requests jumped by over 10%...a huge volume of incoming calls.

So how does all this relate to grant writing?

Or...turn the question around. Isn't a funding request essentially the same process? You have to find the right grantor (target market) whose interests align with your mission. Then you study their goals, methods, and expectations (needs). Finally write a proposal that communicates your understanding, your vision, and persuasively details what you are going to accomplish in return for the funding.

The end result of a marketer's work, the part that you see every day, is generally some form of communication: advertising, promotions, coupons, social media campaigns. But the preceding, equally important work—the marketing plan—is rarely seen outside the organization. In grant writing, the proposal is both the plan *and* the resulting communication; because funders want to see all the detail:

- everything about the requesting agency and its unique ability to get results
- detailed description of the issue/problem to be addressed
- specific and measureable objectives
- complete discussion of the strategies, tactics, methods, time frames, and outcomes
- measurements and evaluation, possible corrective actions
- budget
- sustainability, additional funding sources.

So your grant proposal is essentially a marketing plan that's also a persuasive communication of your vision about the issue at hand, how it relates to your funder's mission, and the commitment you will bring to its resolution.

That's why you need to think like a marketer at every step of the proposal development process.

- Target Markets. Can you expand your base of funders by doing some donor research? If so, learn all there is to know about their mission, inclinations and requirements.
- Only select those whose requirements and inclinations you can match
- Are there new opportunities with current funders
- Establish your agency's point of difference (singular ability to address the issue)
- Define and organize your plan of action
- Craft a persuasive, interesting document to maximize your chance of a positive response

Obviously the final component, the actual writing, is how you will make the sale...just as Ramada's advertising convinced a lot of business travelers to give it a try. So it should be much more than a dull recitation of facts (with the possible exception of certain government funders). It should immediately engage its readers, and keep them interested with easy-to-read, narrative writing that includes all the facts, data, and supporting material. Like a professional athlete, you're looking for every little edge because, like them, you're up against major competition for the funds. So next time you craft a proposal, make sure it's both a serious plan and a compelling advertisement.

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