

# The top 10 funding application errors

Thursday, 02 August 2012

With competition for funding at its fiercest for years, it is important that charities make their applications stand out - and not for the wrong reasons.

The Directory of Social Change estimates that ineligible applications made to the largest trusts in 2010 equated to seven years of wasted effort. This pointless exertion seems not to have lessened since then. According to the latest figures from the Big Lottery Fund, 46 per cent of applications to its

Reaching Communities programme between May and July this year were ineligible. So where are charities going wrong? We asked funders to share their thoughts on why so many applications end up in the recycling bin.

## 1. Applying for grants you can't possibly get

"If only they had read our eligibility criteria, they would clearly see we don't fund that" is a perennial complaint from funders. Stephen Pittam, trust secretary of the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, which largely funds work that promotes peace and social justice, says: "We get applications to repair churches in East Anglia. We don't fund in East Anglia and we don't do building work on churches."

The trust also gets a lot of applications from people who want to run welfare projects, even though it clearly states in its entry criteria that it does not fund such schemes. Comic Relief has received applications on behalf of an HIV project in Tanzania for a fund that operates only in Stoke-on-Trent. The Big Lottery Fund has received applications to fund the installation of double glazing in houses.

## 2. Asking for too much money. Or not enough

Receiving applications for unrealistic sums of money is another bugbear of funders. Andy Winder, grants team manager at the Henry Smith Charity, a funder that tackles social and economic disadvantage, says its average grant size is about £80,000, but that does not stop organisations asking for a lot more.

"People come and ask for £500,000," he says. But the opposite can also be also true, according to Gilly Green, head of UK grants at Comic Relief. Some applicants ask for less money than they need in the mistaken belief that this will increase their chances of success. "It's an assumption that's not correct," she says.

### 3. Providing too much information

The Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust requests applications of no more than four pages, but has regularly received bids of more than double that length. "People often send in reams of paper," says Pittam. John Taylor, head of the west midlands region at the Big Lottery Fund, says that it often receives applications that include appendices, photographs or additional reports. The funder has to go back to the charity to get it to resend the application, which only causes delay.

### 4. Avoid jargon and buzz words

Charities may be tempted to throw in a few of the latest buzz words or phrases, such as 'localism' or the 'big society', in their funding applications. The hope is that this will give them an edge - but it won't. The BLF's Taylor says: "It often hides what they are trying to do." A reliance on acronyms also confuses. Taylor advises charities to apply in their own language. "Don't feel that you've got to use a language you're not used to," he says.

### 5. Streams of consciousness and other stylistic problems

Funders may want charities to apply in their own words, but they still need to make sure those words are readable. Trusts are regularly faced with what Winder calls a "wall of words". Funders work to deadlines and are often looking at 40 or 50 applications a week. Winder says: "Assessors are reading loads of applications and they often get confronted with something that has no paragraphs, really long sentences and very dense text. You look at it and think: 'Oh my God.'" It is a good idea to ask someone not connected with your organisation to read your grant applications before they are sent to ensure they make sense.

### 6. The budget doesn't add up

At the Institute of Fundraising's recent National Convention, the suggestion that funding bids often contain budgets that don't add up provoked consternation. But funders say that simple errors are surprisingly common. For example, a budget is itemised, detailing all the costs that the charity

envisages, but the final amount has been added up wrongly. This isn't always because charities can't use calculators but because costs are amended - by, for example, the chief executive - and the final amount asked for remains unaltered.

### 7. An invitation to talk to the funder isn't taken up

Large funders welcome phone calls to discuss potential projects. "We don't want to waste people's time," says Pittam. "It's always better to try to get a sense of whether something is going to be a possibility or not." Despite requesting a prior conversation about all applications above £120,000, Green says that Comic Relief still gets unsolicited applications for projects requesting hundreds of thousands of pounds. She says: "If we'd had a conversation, we might have said we are quite interested in your work, but we are not going to fund you at that level."

#### 8. Forgetting to tailor the application to the funder

In the current harsh economic climate, charities are applying to ever more trusts and foundations to provide funding for their work. But in too many cases they're not tailoring the applications to the individual funder. BLF's Taylor says: "They are just using the same information, almost cutting and pasting it onto different application forms without actually looking at the questions the funder is asking.

"I can understand why that happens, but it actually means their application is less likely to be successful."

#### 9. Assuming the funder knows all about you

You and your colleagues may know all about your charity and its aims, but don't expect the outside world to know what you do. Too many charities make the assumption that the funder is familiar with their work, or they are so engrossed in the work they do that they forgot to provide a basic explanation. Taylor says: "My sense is that people are often very passionate about their project and therefore don't describe the very basic things about who the beneficiaries are, what the project does, how they do it and what impact they have. They are so close to it that they almost take too much for granted." Green warns that assuming funders have knowledge of your work is a dangerous thing.

#### 10. What difference will you make?

Where applications often disappoint, say funders, is in the elaboration of the change they hope to bring about. According to the BLF, the main reason applications are rejected lies in failing to show how the lives of beneficiaries will be improved. Pittam says: "So many applicants don't give an explanation about the strategy for achieving change or a clear indication of what they are trying to achieve." Funders want a cohesive story, says Green, including evidence of demand for a charity's services and the outcomes it will create. "Very often the latter parts just fall away," she says.

... but funders are not without fault

According to a book published in March, charities waste more than £100m a year on making duplicated or unnecessary reports to foundation and government funders. Caroline Fiennes, director of donor consultancy Giving Evidence and

author of *It Ain't What You Give, It's The Way That You Give It*, says a quarter of the estimated £410m charities spend on reporting to funders is unnecessary expenditure. Sue Robinson, a trainer with the Institute of Fundraising and former fundraiser with Sense Scotland, says that EU funds and some Big Lottery Fund grant streams ask for receipts for every item. "If you're claiming for volunteer expenses, you have to show the bus ticket," she says. "It's ludicrous. If you have a large sum of money you almost have to employ someone purely to administer the budget."

Robinson argues that good funding bids from charities that have good track records are sometimes rejected because funders don't think that they have the administrative staff or software to manage the funds. She says: "They've invested their money in meeting the need they were set up to meet, but dealing with those big funders requires you to have a robust back office."

Article published in Third Sector (31 July 2012): [Click Here](#)