

Riding through FoundationLand

How a good story can lead to a great grant

by Greg Cantori

Executive Director

Marion I. & Henry J. Knott Foundation

The time has come. You've done special fundraising events. Made appeals to the community. Applied for public funding from the state and local governments. You've tried just about everything, and you've realized that you need to find a source of money for your program that doesn't fit any neat funding niche. It looks like you are ready to traverse "FoundationLand."

What is a Foundation?

Foundations are institutions whose sole purpose is to find and fund programs that are innovative, effective, and might prove to be a model for others someday. A foundation may be the only organization willing to take a chance and make a grant to a program like yours. Seem daunting? Well, it can be if you try to do it all at once. Like mounting a curb, if you break the effort into logical steps, you'll be over the first hurdle and better prepared for the next one.

So what exactly is a foundation? Foundations are nonprofit corporations or trusts focused on making grants to unrelated organizations, institutions or individuals for scientific, educational, cultural, religious, or other charitable purposes.

It's been said that when you've seen one foundation, you've seen just one foundation! Despite their individuality, let's look at them anyway.

There are four basic types of foundations:

Family Foundations tend to be governed by the original donor and/or their family. Most are unstaffed, with family members volunteering their time to review requests for funding and conducting site visits. Larger and more established family foundations (those with \$10 million or more in assets) generally have some staff and clearer guidelines in how to approach them and make an application.

Independent Foundations may have been created by someone with great wealth but the family may have lost interest and control over the years, leaving the operations to mostly unrelated trustees, many with expertise in areas such as health care, education or human services.

Community Foundations are hybrids in that they solicit funding as well as make grants. If you can find a donor or program officer who takes an interest in your patrol program, they might designate a yearly grant to your program. If you don't have your nonprofit IRS 501(c)3 status, a community foundation may be willing to take your program under its wing, making you eligible for other foundation grants.

Corporate Foundations are legally separate from their parent company and make grants from a pool of money that is set aside annually, often depending on how well the company did the previous year. You can sometimes get a grant from a corporate foundation and a direct donation from the company itself. It is even better if they have an employee matching program. See if your state also offers tax incentives such as tax credits to corporate donors.

Step 1: Getting Ready

Before you call or visit a foundation, ask yourself, "am I really ready?" Have you identified the vision, strengths and weaknesses of your program? A compelling, clear vision will get not only foundations to buy in, but your own colleagues and other supporters as well.

Assess your **Needs** versus your **Wants** – make a table with those headings and list what you and your staff agree are essential items and what would be nice to have.

Try to answer the following questions:

- *What is inadequate?* What is not working because you don't have the resources (human or otherwise)?
- *What are the facts about bike patrols?* Can you show data about how effective your program is? Do you keep process stats such as numbers of calls for assistance, arrests, lives saved, ambulance runs cancelled, attendance at community meetings? How about harder-to-measure but also important outcomes – such as reducing the percentage of certain types of crimes, or increasing the feeling of safety and security? Know your statistics, not only locally, but also how you compare nationally – use IPMBA as a resource. You'll find yourself recounting these basic facts many times over. Knowing them makes you an authority.
- *What do others say about you?* Keep a well-organized binder filled with thank-you notes, awards, certificates, newspaper articles and pictures of your crew in action. Letters of support from businesses, community associations, and political leaders also add to your credibility and therefore fundability. If you don't have them, ask.
- *What would you do without the money?* Although you may not like answering this, you need to honestly assess what will happen without the necessary funding. How will this impact your community, your operations, your agency?

In researching which foundations to contact, look at the lowest hanging fruit first – foundations you may already know about and who know you! Next, contact your regional association of grantmakers or get a local funders directory. They often have a list of foundations and their funding interests. Talking to a program officer will often lead to many other foundation possibilities. In fact, your job is not only finding who will fund you, but which foundation is the best prospect (the best 'fit') in

funding you. Don't waste your time or theirs trying to convince a foundation to fund outside of their typical giving areas.

Recognize that in FoundationLand what works well with one foundation might totally backfire with another. For example, say an officer knows someone on the board of a local foundation. He might try to make a direct approach to that trustee and it might work out well. But try and do the same with another foundation and you may find you actually angered the foundation trustees and staff because of a perceived "end-run" on their grant process. Learn what approach works best for each foundation before you "go in." A simple phone call or email usually does the trick.

Step 2: Writing the Proposal

You'll need to prepare a letter of inquiry or introduction. This is a one or two page letter that includes:

An *introduction* as the executive summary for the letter and includes the amount of money needed or requested, a description of the project, the qualifications of staff, and a timetable.

Your *organization's description* should be concise and focus on the ability of your program to meet the stated need. Provide a very brief history and description of your current program while demonstrating a direct connection between what is currently being done and what you will accomplish with the requested funding. You will flesh this section out in greater detail if you are invited to submit a full proposal.

Your *statement of need* is an essential element of the letter and must convince the reader that there is an important need that can be met by your project. The statement of need includes: a description of the target population and geographical area, appropriate statistical data in abbreviated form, and several concrete examples.

Your *proposed solution* will describe the project briefly, including major activities, names and titles of key project staff, and your desired objectives. As with your organizational description, this will be presented in far greater detail in a full proposal.

Other *funding sources* being approached for support of this project should be listed in a brief sentence or paragraph. Funders like to know others are looking at supporting your project as well.

A *summary* simply restates your intentions.

This letter may be your only formal contact with a funder and like any first impression, needs to be well-written and have a professional appearance.

If a foundation finds your letter interesting, it will usually ask for a full proposal and provide an outline to follow. Be sure to follow their set procedure, as deviating from it might disqualify you as a candidate.

Your proposal should educate them and persuade them to fund you. What seems obvious to you is very likely muddy to them. And please remember your proposal may also eventually serve as your "contract," so don't promise more than you can deliver!

Before you dive into either the letter or proposal, sort out your ideas.

- Outline your proposal – what you will say and in which order.
- Avoid jargon at all costs! Funders get frustrated if they don't understand. Have someone outside of your division, preferably someone who isn't even a bike officer or medic, proofread it.
- Make your case compelling but not preachy or overstated.
- "KISS" it – keep it simple and straightforward. Funders don't expect you to be a professional grant writer. They just want to clearly understand what you need.
- Go generic – once you've completed all this hard work, don't waste it. Your proposal will be easy to modify for additional common grant formats and customizing.
- Make sure you don't neglect telling a great story! Without it, your proposal will be dry and much less compelling.

There are three parts to making a good case for funding: 1) *State the Facts*, 2) *Put them into Context*, and 3) *Tell your Story*.

There is usually someone already on your staff who is a good storyteller. What makes good stories compelling? They all have a:

1. **Protagonist:** Someone or some group with whom we can identify and sympathize.
2. **Hook:** A situation or goal that is interesting and worthwhile.
3. **Conflict:** The situation has a dilemma or problem that begs for a solution.
4. **Details:** Brief but relevant points that set the stage.
5. **Emotional impact:** We won't care unless we can "feel" the situation ourselves.
6. **Clear moral:** The outcome makes sense and helps us understand where the reader might fit in.

Why do stories work so well? Stories are an ancient way to help others remember key points. Stories are also very engaging, preventing boredom. Think of the hundreds of grant requests foundations must read and hear about every year. If you tell a story to make your point, your request will be the one they remember. Stories will also force you to weave all the pieces together. In making a case for funding bike patrols, by default, you have one of the most interesting and compelling stories a funder has likely heard all year!

Are there pitfalls to storytelling? Of course there are. We've all been held hostage to the over talkative story teller! Stories can also reduce your credibility if they appear too far-fetched, are not backed up with facts, or are not directly relevant to your

request.

Stories can also be used:

Internally, with your own staff to create a history of your program. To build credibility, don't just talk about all the great things that were accomplished, but also what went wrong. Everyone appreciates and remembers hard luck stories and the honesty behind them.

Meetings, media, and events, to make a case for support and to convey a consistent, compelling message to all your supporters.

Advocacy, to tell your legislators a bike patrol story that they can use in future speeches.

Step 3: Stay in Touch

Once you've submitted your proposal, don't just wait around. Send a thank you note even if you are denied a grant. And expect rejection. You can always ask what to do better next time.

Continue to build upon your relationships with your foundations.

- Call to discuss any organizational changes and new program initiatives not only to update them, but to get their feedback, deepening their commitment to your patrol's efforts.
- Ensure grant reports are on time and contain useful information that can be shared with the public and the foundation's board members and staff.
- Send relevant progress reports, news or statistics.

Ask for help in applying to other foundations, including national ones.

- A foundation usually does not want to be looked at as only a source of money. Your funder may be very willing to discuss and even review your proposal beforehand and may also discuss it with other funders.
- Once funded, ask for a letter of support. A demonstration of local foundation support can have a big impact on not only other foundations, but on other types of donors as well.

Now that you've just learned to ride through FoundationLand, you're sure to do it with confidence. But remember: like any bike skill, applying for funding takes practice!

Resources:

The Foundation Center (<http://fdncenter.org/>) offers foundation directories and other resources. It has a free Foundation Finder Guide and a free news digest that will list grant opportunities by category. It also features a web-based proposal writing short course.

The Grantmanship Center (<http://www.tgci.com/funding/states.asp>) – In addition to training seminars they have a simple listing of many foundations, by state.

Grantselect (www.grantselect.com) has a free seven-day trial to research foundation and other grant opportunities.

GrantStation (www.grantstation.com) is an interactive website that allows grantseekers to identify potential funding sources for their programs or projects, and mentors you through the grantseeking process. It offers access (for a fee) to a searchable database of grantmakers who are actively accepting proposals from a variety of organizations, federal grant deadlines updated daily, and links to the funding agencies in your state.

GuideStar (www.guidestar.org) – In addition to a comprehensive database with the financial and backgrounds of nearly all nonprofits and foundations, GuideStar offers the fee-based Grant Explorer feature.

The Council on Foundations (<http://www.cof.or>) is a foundation membership association that lists over 2000 members by giving area, including crime.

Regional Association of Grantmakers (<http://www.givingforum.org/ralocator.html>) – Regional associations are a great first stop for learning about your local foundations.

Non-Profit Guides (<http://www.npguides.org/>) offers free web-based grant-writing tools for non-profit organizations, charitable, educational, public organizations, and other community-minded groups.

State Bicycle and Pedestrian Coordinators (http://www.bikewalk.org/contacts_links/state_bikeped_coord.htm) – If you haven't already done so, contact your state coordinator. They are often a wonderful resource for not only funding but also other ways to support your patrol program.

Greg Cantori is the Executive Director of the Marion I. & Henry J. Knott Foundation, which provides over \$2.5 million in annual grants throughout Maryland. Years ago, as a bike mechanic, Greg used to provide free repairs and maintenance to the local patrol fleet. He now regularly commutes 44 miles roundtrip to the Foundation by bicycle. He also serves on the board of directors for One Less Car, Maryland's cycling advocacy organization. He can be reached at gcantori@knottfoundation.org.

© 2005 IPMBA. This article appeared in the Fall 2005 issue of *IPMBA News*.