

## **Why don't funders explain?**

Surely basic courtesy and transparency demand that public funders or tax-relieved charitable trusts explain why they have refused a grant application. The 'case against' is that it's a drain on stretched admin, applicants' expectations are often unrealistic, and many applications are submitted without reference to a grant-maker's stated criteria.

When an application has followed the funder's processes and fits its policies, an explanation of refusal seems only fair. But often it's not that simple.

Competition may have been strong. It's rather like applying for a job. Your application was high quality – you did well to reach the last 10 out of 100 bids – but others were even better, and confidentiality prevents discussion with you. With a limited budget, the funder wanted a balanced portfolio of grants, and yours didn't quite fit. Not easy to take, after your team has worked hard and had optimistic conversations with the assessor, but the explanation isn't sinister.

Don't beat yourself up looking for flaws in your performance. Perhaps you presented so well that the funder thought you'd succeed elsewhere, so they preferred a less experienced applicant facing worse odds or trying to meet even greater needs.

Even so, a bit of constructive feedback can go a long way. But it is difficult to explain when someone's confident presentation subtly crossed over into smugness. Common problems:

- Being so used to describing your own work that you rushed over past achievements obvious to you but new to the funder.
- Explaining your proposal in 'needy' terms, but not saying – with numbers – what a grant would 'buy'. So the application lacks practicality and reads like mere hope.
- Pleading your organisation's needs rather than your beneficiaries'.
- Taking the present trustees as given, without explaining that they are all volunteers representative of the local community and/or beneficiaries.
- Presenting accounts with unexplained income, large reserves or high-value assets that make your application seem unnecessary.

But reasons for refusal aren't always obvious or even finely judged. Sadly, sometimes a lot of applications are fundable but none stand out as particularly high quality. Some will get funded, perhaps because the funder's budget must be spent or lost, but the marginal decisions are pretty arbitrary.

Funders aren't perfect. Their guidelines may be unintentionally ambiguous. They can rush decisions, make poor judgements, or misread accounts. They can turn down good applications unchallenged by competition. Sometimes they will let a poor one through which eventually fails for predictable reasons. Still others may be given the money and under-achieve, with little said. Funders don't like admitting mistakes, and their evaluation processes may be flawed too.

A more common ‘fault’ is to have fairly open criteria, and then to review applications less on their merits than on the policy directions they imply. Thus the range of applications helps the formulation of policy – which is tough on the unsuccessful applicants. But it cuts both ways. A wide open doorway can allow funders to ‘discover’ new needs, which appear in their guidelines a while later, after the ‘new’ grant was successful.

Small funders have fewer resources. With few staff, or none, giving feedback can be a significant call on time. Get your ‘pitch’ down to a well-crafted couple of pages, and hope for a cheque; don’t expect much else.

High volume grant-makers are different. Ignore their application form at your peril. Without being dishonest, make sure you tick as many boxes as possible, or you won’t get to Stage 2. When they ask for the likely outcomes of a grant or the risks of making one, tell them. If you can’t do this, don’t apply. Rethink what you’re doing, or at least how you explain it.

But there is still an element of luck. You don’t have a right to funding, so don’t expect the funder to write your application for you, or berate them if it isn’t chosen. Funders are understandably more interested in successful applications, but within the limits of their time are likely to be sympathetic to helping unsuccessful applicants succeed in future. They do know you have good intentions and that funders can’t achieve their own purposes without good applications.

Yet every funder deals with too many applications falling outside their stated criteria (or on their ‘*We will not fund*’ list), or lacking a clear statement of what a grant would achieve. The more applicants omit this basic homework, the weaker the case for funders investing time in explaining why they didn’t fund rather than focussing on what they are funding.

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