

10 TIPS FOR WRITING BETTER PROJECT PROPOSALS

The ability to write winning proposals is essential for all development and aid organisations. Despite the success of some organisations in exploring alternative funding streams, the capacity for attracting donor funds by winning bids remains at the centre of the success of organisations.

MzN International's donor funding team has summarised the most important tips for making a proposal more likely to win:

1. PLAN ENOUGH TIME & BUDGET!



Many proposals are doomed to fail for the simple reason that not enough time is planned for collecting information. Many proposals require vast amount of information to be gathered, comprehensive plans to be drawn up and convincing budgets to be written.

This is essential to support the impression that the bidder is a professional organisation that knows what it is doing. It is impossible to collate this information in a week, let alone compose it in a way that makes sense and is professional.

“Many organisations rely too much on their track record! This seems to make them just a bit too relaxed about their chances to win the grant” says Carl, one of MzN International's proposal development consultants..

Make sure you plan well ahead and have enough funding for exploration visits, consultants, creating graphic material and context analysis. This is particularly important in proposals where country offices are included. Last minute information requests from country offices will likely yield low quality responses.

2. COMPLETE AND CONCISE



Include all and only the information the donor is asking for. If responding to a Request For Proposals (RFP), follow the format and order of the RFP. Resist the urge to include all those other credentials, policies and experience that you feel might just be useful to include. These will most likely be ignored anyway or worse yet, disqualify the proposal.

After reading the first page, the reader should have no doubt about the project's key objectives, who the beneficiaries are (and how many), how much funding is being asked for and what will be achieved, and when during the project.

A good proposal answers all of the donor's questions, whilst remaining concise. Generally speaking, a proposal does not exceed 10 to 15 pages with all detail (staffing, scheduling, detailed budget) being confined to a well-structured and correctly referenced appendix.

Language is important. A well-written proposal goes straight to the point, is succinct, reader-friendly and well structured. Avoid jargon, too many acronyms and passive language.



3. SUITS THE DONOR



You



Donor

Proposals that do not address the donor's needs and requirements are doomed to fail! Research the donor's mission, values and objectives and tie them into your proposal. Know exactly what projects have previously and are currently funded and what areas, sectors and themes are preferred by them.

Always stick to the guidelines of what is funded and up to which amount. "You will be amazed how many proposal are rejected because the bidder asked for more funding than available or ask for funding in areas that the donor simply does not work in" says Irene, another MzN International consultant.



4. STICK WITH THE DONOR'S FORMAT

Where the donor requires a specific format, stick to it! If no format is prescribed, stick with the order and priority in which the RFP asked for information.

To make proposals comparable donors often create checklists distilled from the RFP and presenting your information in that order is likely to increase the proposal's chances of success.



5. FOLLOW ALL INSTRUCTIONS

While some instructions donors give can feel misleading or even contradictory, it is essential that you read all guidelines and instructions carefully and follow them to the letter. It is very rare that a proposal that does not follow the given instructions, is given any further consideration.



6. CORRECT AND SPECIFIC

Proposal turnaround times are getting shorter. Whilst one might think that a few formatting or budgeting errors may be excusable, it is important to bear in mind that the competition for grants is increasing too and with it, the donor's choice of implementing partner.

It may sounds simplistic, but double checking those page numbers, calculations and checking that all rationales and assertions are truly applicable, add value and are relevant might just put the proposal on top of the pile.



7. PRESENT YOURSELF CREDIBLY



Even if the bidder is a well-known organisation, the donor is unlikely to know all relevant facts and credentials about the bidding organisation. Credentials should be summarised as short and concise success statements to support the impression of an experienced organisation.

These days, donors are especially wary of the organisational and project management capacity. The bidder needs to demonstrate organisational capacity to run the projects on time and on budget. Provide details of staff experience and updates on similar projects currently being implemented or from previous projects to display organisational capacity.



8. BE REALISTIC, BE ACCOUNTABLE



Any proposal must include specific, realistic goals that can be measured within a set timeframe, against a robust methodology and clearly identifies the beneficiaries.

Bidders commonly under-estimate the time and costs required for staff development, transparent accounting systems, technology support and other infrastructure needed for programmatic excellence. Low-balling these costs raises questions regarding the bidder's organisational capacity.

The solution is to include them and if the final budget exceeds what the donor usually funds, identify the shortfall and find other sources of funding for them. Simply leaving them out should not be an option.

9. MAKE IT SUSTAINABLE

Sustainability is more than a buzzword and proposals are far more likely to succeed if your sustainability plan does not simply read "look for other funding towards the end of this project".

Chris, Director at MzN International thinks that "donors need to demonstrate a lasting difference, which in turn requires financial and programmatic sustainability. This can come in many forms ranging from private sector engagement to income generation or beneficiaries' involvement."

10. AVOID THE "BUDGET REJECTION TRAP"



A lot of bidders spend considerable time writing the project and treating the budget as an afterthought that the "finance people" will do. In most casts, this causes a discrepancy between the financials and the narrative, especially when the former has been created under considerable time pressure.

A lot of good project proposals fail because the budget makes no sense or adds no value (we call it the budget rejection trap). It also shows a lack of organisational capacity that donors are less and less willing to overlook.

Start with the budget on day one and develop it concurrently to the narrative. Do not separate programme and finance staff during the proposal-writing period, rather make sure both work closely together. You may need to provide some basic budgeting training for this.

TALK TO US.

Want to know more? Or would you like to discuss or add your experiences? Contact Chris by email at chris@mzninternational.com. More resources and tips can also be found at www.mzninternational.com

The above content has been taken from MzN International's Proposal Writing and Business Development Training Course. For more information, please visit:

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