

Let the Truth Be Your (Grant Writing) Guide

By Karen Hodge

A freelance grant writer in California was recently convicted of three counts of defrauding the United States Department of Education. The court found her guilty of forging signatures and making false statements in federal grant documents. The prosecution believed that her primary motivation was the 15% commission on the \$35 million request that she concealed within the grant proposal (which would have meant more than \$5 million for her). Her client had to return the funds, and when she is sentenced later this month, she could get up to 35 years in prison.

If you shuddered when you read this story, good! It's alarming for two reasons.

First, you should never, never, never lie in a grant proposal. That includes little white lies and lies of omission. I know that may seem like common sense, but you would be surprised how many good people lose sight of that basic tenet:

- "My project would be more likely to get funded if more people were affected by the problem we seek to address. So I'll just say they are."
- "My boss is out of town, so I'll sign the grant for him."
- "The guidelines say we are ineligible because we receive federal funding, but if I leave that little item out of the proposal, they'll never know."
- The guidelines say they won't fund refreshments at the event,

so I'll get around that by putting those expenses in the office supplies line of the budget, which they will fund."

- "We need a collaborating partner. I'll say XYZ Agency is on board because they will give our project more credibility and I am sure they would back us, even though I haven't talked to them yet."
- "We really need the money to serve our clients, so I will say whatever I have to in order to get it."

I will be honest: most lies in grant proposals are minor, well-intentioned and never come to light. However, it is not unheard of for a grantee to have to return funds if caught having made untrue statements in a request. In addition, they could end up being blacklisted by the grantmaker and by everyone to whom the grantmaker speaks of the deception (and grantmakers do talk to each other). In extreme circumstances, there could be criminal penalties, as in the case of the freelance writer mentioned above.

Deception is just not worth it. If you have to lie to get the money from a particular funder, look for another funding source or re-work your project so that it is one that honestly meets the grantmaker's guidelines. A grants officer I know was once asked by her boss what "story" she would be comfortable telling a funding source. She replied: "The truth." Good answer!

The second problem raised in the story about the criminal prosecution of the grant writer is the issue

of working on commission: taking a percentage of grant dollars raised as opposed to a flat fee, hourly rate or salary. The Association of Fundraising Professionals, as well as most other professional fundraising and grant writer organizations, state clearly that commission-based fundraising is unethical. There's no gray area here.

Over the years, many people have suggested that I work on commission, and I would be lying if I did not admit that I would have made more money on commission than the straight salary I have been receiving. However, that kind of arrangement lays the foundation for trouble.

Estimates vary, but a widely accepted average is that one in three grants submitted is funded. That means that two proposals out of three are *not* funded. Would you really want to get paid for only

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one-third of the work you do? If someone is getting paid only for funded proposals and not all proposals are funded, he/she might be tempted to "massage" the data to increase the odds that the grant would be approved and he/she would get paid. Grant writers are people, too: they have mortgages and kids and car payments... and temptations. Add to that very high stakes—like a 15% commission on a \$35 million grant—and organizations can make it very easy for the grant writer to tiptoe across the line of ethics.

If you want to negotiate a bonus arrangement with an employer, that is okay as long as it is tied to productivity and is not a commission (for example, getting paid a flat

\$500 fee for increasing the number of proposals submitted by 10% over the previous year). Overall, though, as a grant writer you want to engage with employers who will pay you for the work you perform, not those who will pay you contingent solely upon, and as a percentage of, the results.

The bottom line is that when you submit a request to a funding source—be it a private foundation or a federal agency—you have a responsibility to maintain honesty throughout the grants process, from proposal submission to final reporting. And you are accountable for every statement you make as well. You might get away with "fudging" things, but do you really want to take that chance? And do you want to be a

person who "gets away with" dishonesty, or a professional who adheres to ethical principles and holds himself accountable to the truth? ■ **NCDC**

Karen Hodge is Assistant Vice President for Advancement for Walsh University in Ohio. Over her career, she has participated in the acquisition of nearly \$18 million in grants from corporate, foundation and government sources. She has also served as a consultant to small nonprofits, teaches college courses on grant writing and frequently speaks on a variety of fundraising and professional development topics. Ms. Hodge has a Bachelor of Arts in Communication and a Master of Science in Technical Education.



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