How to know when to apply for a grant

If you have been reading RFPs for a while, you might have some clear indicators of what to look for when deciding whether to apply for a particular grant. If you are new to proposal writing, however, the following checklist in the book The Grants Development Kit by my colleague, Jacqueline Ferguson, should be helpful.

Ms. Ferguson suggests that you ask yourself the following questions when you discover a grant opportunity:

(1) Are you eligible?

(2) Does your project match the funder's purpose and priorities?

(3) Do you have the necessary facilities and staff to conduct the project?

(4) Do you have other resources to contribute to the project?

(5) Does your staff have the expertise to develop and administer the project?

(6) Who is the competition—and can you compete?

(7) Are the financial terms of the grant acceptable?

(8) What are the matching funds requirements, and can you meet them?

(9) What are the funder's restrictions on the grant and the project?

(10) Is long-term funding available?

(11) How will you continue the project after the grant expires?

(12) What are the costs of developing the proposal?

(13) What are the chances of winning a grant?

(14) Is the project feasible in terms of time, funding, allowable costs, expected outcome, evaluation requirements, and other requirements?

Some of these questions seem very simple, and the answers are either "yes" or

"no." However, for some of the questions, a "no" can present other options. For example, if your district is not eligible, but a higher-education institution is, could you partner with a local college or university in order to apply?

Carefully answer question No. 8 after reading the RFP. Some funders allow matching funds to be a combination of cash and in-kind contributions. If you cannot meet the matching requirement with cash, consider using in-kind contributions if they are allowed. Also, do not overlook the possible in-kind contributions you'll receive if you have partners in your project.

Questions 10 and 11 are concerns shared by many funders who are cautious about being the sole source of funding for a project. Funders rarely want to see a project come to an end when their funding comes to an end. Remember that grants, for the most part, are to be used as seed money to start a project.

Question No. 13 is not a trick question, but it gets to the issue of how many grant awards are going to be distributed and how many first-time grantees there will be. Some competitions only give out one to three awards, and if you are a first-time applicant, your chances of winning an award are probably slim. Some grant programs tend to award funds to applicants they have worked with and funded in the past. The program officer should be able to answer these kinds of questions.

I would recommend that you spend some time asking these questions when an opportunity arises, so that you move forward in the proposal development and writing processes feeling secure about your decision to apply. If you cannot answer the majority of the questions from a strong position, pass up the current opportunity and seek out others that are likely more worth your efforts.