

Acquiring Grant Support

Getting organizations to give you money is nice, but requires work

A “grant” is a gift of resources, typically money. The idea that there are government, for-profit, and non-profit groups that will actually give you money for your business is an amazing concept. Federal, state, county, businesses, and non-profit entities often have resources to grant to businesses (or non-profits) that can illustrate that they can use grant funds wisely and create impact. But, these grants require work to locate, apply for, and report on, so they do not come without cost.

Typical reasons for grant application failure include missing deadlines, submitting poorly written or incomplete applications, having a poor business track record (bad reputation in the community) and insufficient talent to implement the proposal.

This article will provide you with a basic overview of the grant process. Like filling-out a loan application, it can seem difficult at first, but if you break the process down into smaller parts, and start early, you can be successful.

Why is this important?

Getting money that you do not have to pay back is better than getting a loan. So, if you have an idea that others are willing to support, invest some time and know-how to apply for a grant.

About grants

As mentioned above, you can apply for money that you don't have to pay back. The trick with grants, however, is that you need to have an idea, product or business that the grant reviewer feels is a worthwhile “investment.” The word investment is used here just like it is with a loan because even grant givers have to show their organizations that good and impactful things will result if they give you financial support. Granters are getting more “precise” with the types of activities they are willing to fund. In the past, grant requests typically were a little broader. Thus, like a good marriage, you need to have compatible interests with the grant givers or you won't even reach the proposal review stage. For example, if an organization is willing to support water saving devices for growers, and you want a new tractor to be more efficient in the field, it is clearly a mismatch of intentions. Here is a list of steps that you can follow to increase your chances of “winning” a grant.

1. Keep searching for good grant matches. The Hawaii Community Foundation is a great resource for local grants (<http://www.hawaiicomunityfoundation.org/>). That organization also has a webpage for grant writers and grant managers (<http://www.hawaiicomunityfoundation.org/>)
2. Acquire the most recent grant application and guidelines and with a highlighter pen, highlight the critical features, such as:
 - a. What types of projects they are funding.
 - b. What types of costs they are covering.
 - c. What, if any, are the “matching” requirements and do you need to put your money out first and request reimbursement? (This could be a big deal as some grants will only give you 25% of what you need, and you need to come up with the other 75%; though, 25% is better than nothing!)
 - d. Application deadline.
 - e. Application format (font size, number of pages, number of appendices, support letters).
 - f. What reporting and final documentation will be required of you?
 - g. Number of copies of the application required.

3. Think and speak positively about your project.
4. Set-up a clean place in your business where you can write your grant.
5. If you plan to seek partners or professional writers for your grant, be clear with them about your expectations and what you can offer in return, and ask them what they specifically expect from you in exchange for their time and talent. Never assume people will help for free, ask them.
6. Know how long it will take for the grant application to physically arrive at its destination so that you can meet application deadlines.
7. If the grant application form does not come with a checklist for completing the grant, make one and use it.

There are other things to consider, but the above are the major ones. Still interested in getting someone else's "free" money? Yes?! Good, here's what to do next.

1. Take out a calendar and mark-off enough days and hours for you to write your grant proposal. This has to be distraction-free time.
2. Start writing your grant response. Just start writing down your ideas as fast as you can get them out of your head and onto the paper or your keyboard.
3. Go back to your "brainstorming" and begin to craft a readable, engaging, and methodical story about what you want to achieve and how that meets the desires of the funders. Be sure to put the final version in the requested format or outline and answer each question in the application form. If no format is provided, divide your application into the following generally accepted categories: (1) What you want to do and Why it is important? (2) How you will do it (including when and where)? (3) Any additional information on why you are the right person for the job.
4. Use as much data as you have to support your claims of the magnitude of the issues to be addressed, the potential impact of the successful implementation of your project, and your ability to carry out the project.
5. Now, get a trusted friend to give you some constructive feedback. Hearing feedback can be hard especially if you don't write often, so prepare yourself to hear the truth (or a version of the truth). One way of managing the feedback is to ask, "Can you please give me three things you like about my proposal and then give me details of where and how I can make it even better?" This simple request can help the person giving you feedback stay focused on what kind of feedback you want.
6. While that review is taking place, get all the other required documents in order. These could include cash flow statements, profit and loss statements, business and marketing plans, copies of federal, state and excise tax forms, bylaws of your organization, etc.
7. Get the review back and make those changes that seem reasonable, even if your ego is fighting it. Thank your reviewers for their time.
8. If you have time, have someone else read your revised grant proposal to get one final set of comments. Revise your proposal accordingly.
9. Use your checklist to make sure you have all the pieces in place. Leaving even one little item out can cause the person screening the applications to reject it or return it to you un-reviewed. Grant writing is a serious business and one mistake can take you out of the competition.
10. Make copies, sign the forms, and get that application in the mail or sent via the web!
11. When you've completed the above, think positive thoughts and go celebrate your hard work.

The review process typically works like this:

1. Applications are opened if they arrive by the due date and time. If not received on time, they may be disqualified and returned.
2. Documents are checked for completeness, and if not complete, might be rejected.
3. Applications are reviewed by a committee that has been given guidelines for scoring the quality and impact of proposals, often relative to their cost.
4. Proposals are ranked on points and then offers are made to the highest-ranked grant proposals. Those not selected are often provided helpful feedback on what was wrong with the proposal. This is of great value to you even if you were not selected. Take that feedback and make your proposal even better next time.
5. If you are selected, more forms need to be signed by you or your organization, and performance contracts are developed and signed.

Now, finally, you start your work. This is one of the most dangerous times in the process to keep and build your reputation as often months have passed and you now have the responsibility of implementing what you asked for money to do. (Be careful what you wish for!)

1. Again, take out your calendar and put in some reporting dates.
2. Keep track of all your expenses – save all receipts and put them in a safe place.
3. Report progress as required.

Well, that is about it for writing, winning and performing under a grant program. It should now be obvious that grant money is not really “free.” But, if you received a \$10,000 grant to install a new greenhouse sprinkler system and it took you only 30 hours to craft and deliver your grant proposal, you just made more than \$300 per hour. Now, that is sweet!

Available Sources

Here are some sources of grants that are open to growers and don't require that you be connected to an educational or research institution. Note, these grant programs are subject to change at any time.

Hawaii Department of Agriculture, Specialty Crop Block Grant

Office of Hawaiian Affairs (<http://www.oha.org/>)

Grant types: Up to \$100,000 to support programs which address OHA Strategic Plan goals in the areas of Education, Health, Human Services, Housing, Economic Development, Native Rights, Culture, Land Management, and Governance.

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) (<http://www.pia.nrcs.usda.gov/>)

Grant types (Support best conservation practices): Agricultural Management Assistance (AMA); Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG); Conservation Security Program (CSP); Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative (CCPI); Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP); Farm and Ranch Land Protection Program (FRPP); Grassland Reserve Program (GRP); Value-added Producer Grant (VAPG); Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP); Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP)

USDA Rural Development (<http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/hi/index.htm>)

Grant types: Community Facilities Programs; Rural Energy; Faith-Based and Community Initiatives Programs; Rural Business - Cooperative Programs; Rural Housing Programs; Rural Utilities Programs

Western Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (WSARE) (<http://wsare.usu.edu/>)

Grant types: Farmer/Rancher (FRG) grants; Graduate Fellow Grants in Sustainable Agriculture; Professional + Producer grant; Professional Development Program (PDP) grants; Research and Education (R&E) grants.

--Credits: Jim Hollyer, Hawaii Agribusiness Guidebook, 2011. Edited by the Agribusiness Incubator Program.