



Thirteen Rules for Working with a Fundraising Consultant

You've interviewed your fundraising consultant, reviewed samples of their work, checked references or word of mouth in the community-you've done your homework. As you sign the letter of agreement, you think: I might actually be able to take a weekend off this month.

Now-it's just time to wait for the money to roll in, right?

Not exactly!

Today, more and more organizations are choosing to outsource all or part of their development efforts. It may be a one-time engagement, such as planning for a capital campaign, or writing a federal grant proposal, or it may be a long-term relationship.

Outsourcing with experienced consultants may make sense for your organization if you:

- Find yourself repeatedly passing up funding opportunities because you don't have the time to pursue them;
- Lack development staff;
- Need special expertise not found on staff; or
- Have a limited budget for grantwriting or other fundraising. In this case, your dollars can access experienced assistance for significantly less than the amount required to hire, train and supervise a novice.

Despite these benefits, outsourcing does not free you or your board members from the responsibility of fundraising. But by developing a solid partnership with your fundraising consultant, you can ease your workload and increase your success.

As proposal writers, researchers and fundraising/philanthropy consultants, we have worked with clients, large and small, for many years. We have found that our clients experience the most success under certain conditions, which we refer to as our "**13 Rules for Working with a Fundraising Consultant.**"

1. **Know what you want to achieve from the outsourcing**-something more specific than "more money!" A good consultant should be able to help you define these goals in the initial consultations.
2. **Gain agreement among the board of directors, the executive director and key staff that outsourcing is right for your organization.** The most frustrating (and least fruitful) experiences occur when either the board or the executive director wants to engage a consultant, and the other party is unsure. Based on painful experience, we try to ferret out and avoid these situations.
3. **Find a consultant whose style and way of working "fits" your organization.** For example, we are known for "having a point of view." We work with a lot of organizations; study best practices,



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read published research in a variety of fields, and have extensive community commitments. We are not passive scribes who will merely write down your words. We try to let potential clients know this before we begin our work so that they are not shocked or upset when we express opinions.

- 4. Clearly define expectations up-front.** If it is important for you to have two weeks to review proposals and incorporate staff feedback, let the consultant know. We try to have an initial "orientation meeting" with new clients after entering into an agreement, so that we can further develop and agree on our respective roles, specific expectations about the project and project timelines.
- 5. Make sure you understand the consultant's fee structure and payment terms.** Fundraising consultants have various pricing structures for their services. Some charge by the hour; some by the project. Most will require initial deposits and periodic payments throughout the engagement. It is important to have a clear understanding before the work begins**.
- 6. Remember that you are still responsible for program development and getting information to the consultant.** For example, in writing a proposal for a new project, we can provide advice about how to approach a particular funder, and research the best practices in the field. We can find statistics that help document the need for your program. What we can't do is unilaterally determine your objectives, the number of people you will serve, how much the program will cost or what your past success has been. You need to provide consultants with up-to-date and timely information so that they can do the best job for you. In addition to regular "check-ins," we ask our clients to keep us on their mailing and e-mail address lists, and routinely share with us good news about their organization and programs.
- 7. Improve your odds for success by nurturing relationships with funders.** Having a consultant does not relieve you of the responsibility for building relationships and letting people know about your organization. A consultant can coach you about approaching funders and conducting site visits; however, you, your board members and your staff are who the funders are interested in hearing from and visiting with. It is your enthusiasm and commitment to the organization and its programs that many times leads to a decision to fund your organization.
- 8. Remember that yours is the name on the final product.** For example, when we are working on a funding proposal, we meet with the organization, interview staff, clients and volunteers, review budgets, make recommendations about attachments, and consult throughout the writing process. We are very serious about quality control; different staff readers review every proposal leaving our office. We use three levels of proofreading to ensure that documents are error-free. Yet (not unlike income tax forms), it is your name on the bottom line. You will be held accountable to the funder. Do not sign off on projects that you have not reviewed.
- 9. Meet schedules and timelines.** Most of the work we do is deadline driven. To meet those deadlines, we work with our clients to develop timelines for each project. If you don't deliver needed materials, or provide information to a consultant when needed, he or she is not going to be



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able to meet established deadlines. One of our frequent sayings is: "A beautifully written proposal sitting on the executive director's desk awaiting signatures does not get funded."

10. **Since you are paying for consultants' expertise, give their advice due consideration.** This doesn't mean that you follow that advice blindly; if you find yourself frequently disagreeing with the consultant's advice, it may mean that there is not a good fit. We had a frustrating experience with a client who repeatedly made substantive changes to "final" proposals we sent to him, and then complained that the proposals we wrote for him "never got funded!"
11. **Let us share in your joy!** We want to hear from you when a proposal gets funded! We take pride in what we do, and want to celebrate in your success. We also want to know when a proposal did not get funded-it presents a learning opportunity for all of us.
12. **Have fun!** We love the work we do and our opportunity to work with great organizations to make this world a better place to live. Yet because our work is deadline driven, and because we know that the stakes are high for our clients, the work is often stressful. We take our work and your projects very seriously, yet you will often find us cracking strange jokes when we are assembling a 300-page proposal for a 5 p.m. Federal Express deadline. We like to have fun with our clients, and we always enjoy celebrating with you when we hear your good news.
13. **Look for Proven Success!** When researching working with a consultant, find one who is willing to tell you about their rate of success, their funding percentage, what is the return on investment, etc? Also find out if they accept every client or if they research the client's potential to secure funding before accepting them as a client.

HERE-4-YOU CONSULTING STATISTICS:

Percent of FUNDS applied for that were secured:	93%
Percent of PROPOSALS applied for that were funded:	84%
Total number of proposals developed:	100+
Average funds secured per proposal:	\$206,538
Average cost per proposal:	\$2,333
Return On Investment:	\$88 per \$1 invested

A note about **percentage/contingency fees. We are sometimes asked by organizations: "Can we pay you a percentage of what you've raised, contingent upon a grant being awarded?" We believe it is important to note the following:

- The Association of Fundraising Professionals (formerly NSFRE) has as one of its statements of ethical principles that members shall not accept compensation that is based on a percentage of charitable contributions.
- Since most funders do not want to pay a percentage "back to the fundraiser," using this method of compensation places the nonprofit organization in the unenviable position of misrepresenting to its funders how funding is being used.
- Despite a fundraising consultant's best work, there may be other factors involved in a funding request being denied. Your organization still has the body of work, and some good advice and products that it can use in the future.