



Overcoming some common Trust Issues

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On 16th October, over 100 of the UK's brightest and best Arts Fundraisers gathered at the Tower of London for an annual conference focusing on all things Trusts.

The conference included a Peer Review session which aimed to give delegates the chance to experience life from the perspective of a trustee. In their role as trustees, delegates were asked to review and assess real-life funding applications from four arts organisations from across the UK.

Following the session I have summarised some of the common strengths and issues delegates identified.

What do Trusts look for?

Firstly, it is important to remember what Trusts are looking for when they are reviewing proposals. Put simply, they are trying to answer one question – “Why should we fund this?”.

Of those five words, one is infinitely more important than the others. “Why should we fund this”.

A funding proposal should be about the Trust, not about you. Its purpose is to show how you can help the Trust to achieve their mission.

The second thing to remember is that, while we spend ages finely crafting a proposal, most Trusts only have a short amount of time to read them. (We gave delegates ten minutes to read the whole proposal and write a short summary). In writing your proposal you need to be sure that your key points come across clearly, even when the proposal is being read quickly.

Delegates were asked to consider both of these points in reviewing the real-life proposals. Their comments have inspired the following tips:

Cut the background noise

In reading the proposals we learned some fascinating things about each of the organisations and their work. The problem was that a lot of it didn't relate to the application, or strengthen it in any way. The danger is that this fascinating information becomes a distraction and risks overshadowing the key points that you really need to get across.

Yes, your proposal needs to give an introduction to your organisation (especially if the Trust you are applying to is unlikely to have heard of you). Yes, you need to build credibility and confidence. Yes, you need to show that you are the right organisation to be addressing the problem or challenge you have identified. No, you don't need to tell them everything you have ever done!

In refining your proposal, be brutal – if a sentence or paragraph is not helping to make an important point, get rid of it. There is no room for fluff.

Cut the jargon

The most common comment I make when I review proposals is “I don't know what this means”. Rarely is this lack of understanding due to a problem with my intellect. The reason is that most proposals feel like they are written in a secret code, only understandable to a few members of an exclusive inner circle.

Sometimes this code relates to a few words or acronyms. ACE, MPM, NPO and HLF all make sense to those of us working in the arts and culture sector on a daily basis. However, a lot of the Trusts you will be applying to don't use this language every day. (For example, it might be obvious to you that NPO means National Portfolio Organisation but for most funders, NPO means Non-Profit Organisation...).

Acronyms are bad. However, they are nowhere near as bad as the impenetrable language organisations use to talk about their “vision” or “concept”. This can more accurately be described as “arty b@!!@£k\$”¹. Lots of fancy words that say nothing at all – certainly not in a way that means anything to anyone outside of the organisation.

More often than not, Trusts aren't interested in the academic concepts behind your work. They just need to be able to picture what will be delivered and what impact it will have on the beneficiaries.

Again, if it doesn't clearly explain how or why you do what you do, it's useless – no matter how much your artistic director likes it!

¹ If you are not sure what I mean, check out <https://artybollocks.com/> for some examples...

Cut the length

Trusts don't have long to read your proposal. Keep it as short as possible. If you can't fit your proposal on to two pages, the chances are you are trying to say too much. (NB – This doesn't mean using size 6 font and 0.1mm margins. It means identifying the key points and cutting the rest).

It's not just the document length that needs to be short. Short sentences are also much quicker to read. Some of the proposals we reviewed had 40-50 word sentences. By the time you reach the end you've forgotten what the point was and you have to go back and try again. Keep sentences to 10-15 words max. While it might feel simplistic it will make it easier for the Trust to read.

Cut the spelling mistakes and grammatical errors

Proof-reading your proposal sounds like an obvious thing to say but it is a vital step that is often forgotten. Spelling mistakes are an easy way of making your organisation look unprofessional, sending the unintentional message that you don't really care about the proposal or the funder. Get a colleague to proof-read – they are more likely to pick up on errors than someone who has spent hours working on it. Even better, get someone from outside of the organisation to read it – they can also pick up on things that don't make any sense.

Grammatical errors, or adding in an unintended extra word, can also it make it harder to read, tripping up, the reader when they are the trying to read quickly. See.

Cut the mass mailing approach

Let's assume for a moment that two things are true:

- 1) The purpose of the proposal is to show why the project is a good fit for the Trust, helping them to achieve their aims.
- 2) Every Trust is different.

If both things are true, how can the same proposal be fit-for-purpose for multiple Trusts?

As part of the session, we asked delegates to identify the aims of the Trust from the proposal alone. For many this proved difficult. If the aim of the proposal is to show how your work helps achieve the aims of the Trust, the aims of the Trust need to be clearly identified within it.

If the same proposal works for lots of Trusts, the chances are it doesn't work for any of them.

So far, we've highlighted five things commonly found in Trust proposals that shouldn't be there. Here's one thing that should be there but is often missing:

Add the passion

Trust proposals aren't assessed by robots or computers. It's not like applying for a mortgage, where specified information is plugged into a formula to determine the outcome. The decisions are made by real human beings, with emotions, interests and biases.

Arts organisations do important, inspiring, exciting work. Most people working for arts organisations are hugely passionate about what they do. Yet, too often this passion is missing from proposals. Bring the project to life for the Trustees - They need to feel that, not only is supporting your work the right thing to do, it is something they **need** to do.

Make them feel angry/sad/fearful/disgusted about the need or challenge you are addressing. Make them feel confident and excited that your approach is going to fix this problem for your beneficiaries. Make them feel even more excited about the prospect of being part of the solution.

The process of running this session highlighted two other issues that might not have been immediately obvious to the delegates. I wanted to share these thoughts here:

Consider the photocopier

I had to print just over 400 pages to prepare the resources for the session. The first thing I did was to set the print quality to low-res and black and white. Trusts do the same. (For example, 400 pages is the equivalent of printing 20 applications for each of a Trusts five trustees).

Almost all of the proposals included photos. This can be a nice way of demonstrating the need for your work and the impact it has. It also helps to break up the text, making it easier to read. However, while your picture might look great on the screen, you need to consider what it will look like if printed in low-res black and white. Is it clear? Does it have the same impact? If not, is there a better picture you can use.

This isn't the only way you need to consider the photocopier. If you send one copy of your application in the post, the chances are it will need to be photocopied. This becomes significantly harder if you have had it bound or stapled. Avoid binding proposals, and remember to include page numbers if it is longer than two pages.

Some organisations have special fonts as part of their house style. While they might look great, remember that the Trust might not have the same font on their computer. This can become a problem if you are emailing proposals. You either need to send the proposal as a PDF, or ensure you are using a common font. (If you are using a custom font you need to make sure it lends itself to being read quickly).

Get it in ahead of the deadline

The Grants Manager of a large UK Trust told me recently that 5% of proposals are received ahead of the deadline. 90% arrive on deadline day. That leaves 5% that arrive after the deadline.

If the Trust receives the application ahead of the deadline they have more time to read it. They can also then come back to you if anything is unclear or missing. This is not possible if you are one of the many that comes crashing through the letterbox on deadline day.

Give yourself the best chance by submitting your proposal early.

(With this in mind, the same Grants Manager offers the following sage advice – “Don’t click submit and then go on holiday! If we have questions we need to be able to reach you”)

Thank you to the Arts Trust Fundraisers Group for including this session as part of the conference. In particular, a huge thank you to Marina Jones, Matt Armstrong, Sophie Henstridge, Vicki Kelsall and Rob Parton for helping to run the session, and to the four organisations for submitting their proposals to be reviewed.

**If you enjoyed this, you can find more blogs and resources on the
“Apollo’s Muse” section of our website:
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About Apollo Fundraising

Apollo Fundraising provides consultancy, training and support to help arts and culture organisations to achieve their fundraising goals.

Our areas of expertise include developing fundraising strategies, building individual giving and legacy programmes and helping organisations to identify their best prospects.

Our experience includes raising funds for a wide range of arts and culture organisations, including opera houses, historic buildings, theatres, orchestras, music festivals, museums and art galleries.

**Contact David today to find out more about our work and to discuss how
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