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Creating an External Funding Strategy: How to Thrive

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Abstract: Seeking external funding for Extension programs is an important investment in our future. Integral assets to Extension agents as they seek external funding are: understanding the relevance of their programming to the community, ensuring their reliability to conduct successful programming, and having the ability to communicate impact to stakeholders. An external funding strategy allows agents to speak their needs in the language of funders. Through this article, agents can examine strategic questions and logical reasoning and the theory behind them to refine an external funding proposal plan. The packaging checklist will ensure that each proposal is compiled for success!

Introduction

In recent years our nation has been troubled by rising gas prices, a slowing economy, and massive budget cuts. The federal budget projected decrease for Cooperative Extension programs in 2009 totals nearly 30 million dollars (Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service, 2007). The Bureau of Labor Statistics reveals in August 2008, the unemployment rate rose to 6.1%, which is among the highest in 16 years (2008). According to the National Center for Education Statistics, only 75% of the incoming freshman high school class actually makes it to graduation (2008).

Cooperative Extension brings innovative university research, knowledge, and practice into communities across America. Extension agents understand programming provides vital tools to shape the lives of people in positive ways. But how will Cooperative Extension navigate the waters of decreased federal and state dollars to deliver programming with a lasting impact on our nation? The answer is through external funding. In order to secure funding, it is essential that Extension agents be able to: understand the relevance to the community of their programming, ensure reliability to conduct successful programming, and demonstrate ability to communicate impact to stakeholders.

Asking Relevant Questions

Asking strategic questions is a crucial step in the process of securing external funding. Answers to these questions help build appropriate rationale for requesting funds, and will assist in choosing which funds to pursue. Justification for the requested funds needs to include statistics to validate the need, past success of programming to gain trust, and measurable ways to evaluate expected impact for accountability. While it is important to have a strong case for support, it is also important to make sure the offered funding truly fulfills a need. Accepting gifts that do not fit into the mission, vision, and identified priorities of the organization can be more hardship than reward (Jackson & Johnson, 1999).

A thoughtful external funding strategy can transform Extension Agents from a programmatic to development mindset. An external funding strategy (EFS) allows agents to communicate needs in the language of external funders (Figure 1). Through this process, we examine strategic questions and the logical reasoning and theory behind them to refine an external funding plan.

Figure 1.
External Funding Strategy

Strategic Considerations	Logical Reasoning/Theory
Describe the critical statistics surrounding the target issue.	Referencing data builds the foundation of program design.
Explain funding sources.	Recognize funding sources to justify the need for additional funds.
Describe the partnerships surrounding target issue.	Collaboration shows connections with organizations to conduct effective programs. Utilize partners' network for external funding.
Explain the strengths of the program.	This demonstrates dependability in programming and builds rapport.
Describe a personal story related to the target issue.	This pulls on the heart strings of potential funders and creates personal connections
Describe the ideal impact for this program pertaining to the target issue.	Focus on impact rather than means to accomplish your goal (staffing, supplies, travel).
Explain the steps needed to accomplish your goal.	Utilize tools such as logic models to assist you to organize, prioritize, and visualize a holistic program design.
List potential funders based on your relationships and networks.	Think about key stakeholders who have a vested interest in the impact of the program.

Speaking Funders' Language

Once agents have completed the EFS and understand the logical reasoning and theory behind their strategic considerations, it is important to move forward by communicating this information in the funders' language. Some detective work can help prepare a proposal. Do they want a written proposal or personal interaction? Do they want to hear heartfelt stories or cold, hard facts? Find out how the donor prefers to communicate and which individual should steward the relationship. The best person to lead the funding proposal is the individual who is hardest for the funder to decline.

When communicating through written proposals or face-to-face visits, explain the funding need in a compelling way to pull on the heartstrings of the funder. Pay special attention to the interest and language that the funder uses, including specific buzzwords. Whether you are sitting face to face in conversation with a donor or reading the latest Request for Proposal from a Foundation, notice the language and non-verbal cues that will allow you to customize the funding request. It is important for Extension agents to be able to communicate what they will be able to accomplish with the new funding and the impact it will have.

After completing the EFS, make sure the proposal information is packaged in an articulate manner. The way external funds are requested can be the key to receive funding. Figure 2 describes the information that should be considered when preparing a proposal for potential donors.

Figure 2.
Packaging Checklist

Statistics	✓
Program Evaluations	✓
Aligns with the Mission of your Organization	✓
Aligns with the Mission of the Funding Source	✓
Fits within Personal Areas of Interest to the Funder	✓
Integrates a Heartfelt Personal Story	✓
Formatted Clearly and Concisely	✓

Conclusion

Donors are interested in improving communities through their gifts and want to know how your good work can create change with the help of their funding. As Mother Teresa said, "Let us more and more insist of raising funds of love, of kindness, of understanding, of peace. The rest will be given."

It is about how the fundable idea is presented to donors. Sell the priceless impact of the gift. Instead of focusing on needing a bus for 4-H members, talk about positive youth development skills that they would miss. Rather than talking about the need for Family and Consumer Sciences staff, present the increase in employee retention rates due to Extension programming in housing and healthy living. Instead of asking for another Agricultural and Natural Resources specialist, talk about the need for critical research in bio-energy technology.

Winning funding awards is about how the story is told. A proposal organized using the EFS along with the Packaging Checklist, will increase the chances for securing critical external funding for programmatic

success!

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