Ask the funder: Crail-Johnson Foundation

Thurlow/Associates sat down with Rachel Roth, Program Officer at the Crail-Johnson Foundation to discuss the foundation's process, preferences and peeves. Here is what we discovered:

How many proposals do you receive annually? How many do you typically fund?
The Foundation uses a two-step process that begins with a letter of inquiry (LOI) and is followed by an invited grant application. In 2015, we received about 230 LOIs and we invited approximately 70 full proposals. Of those, we were able to fund about 60 grants.

What are some elements that set a solicitation apart from the rest?
First, a well-written narrative. Our LOI form is short because we value succinct cases for support that engage us by teaching and not selling. Being able to describe the organization, the issue(s) being addressed, the community and people being served, and how the organization is addressing the issue (methodology).

Second would be the outcomes or impact the organization has through its work. It is important to differentiate outcomes from activities, which means an organization needs to have measurement built into programs. Data can be qualitative or quantitative, but measurement of some kind is important in order to describe the impact.

And third would be clear budgets that reflect the full cost of operations and programs.

What are some common "mistakes" that nonprofits make while trying to solicit funding?
I see a lot of applications that don't truly make the case for support or have a hard time getting specific regarding what they do. We want to learn about what you do and what makes your program effective.

I also want you to be realistic regarding the type of data you're going to be able to collect to assess program impact. Think about what you *can* easily collect and assess.

Any pet peeves when it comes to solicitations/proposals/packaging?
I have a few:

- Be sure to follow instructions and submit *everything* that is asked for. Smaller foundations such as ours often do not have the staff time to locate a missing piece of information.

- There are ways to demonstrate uniqueness through the narrative. So often, an organization will say they are the only one providing their programs and I know of an organization or programs that are providing very similar programs in the same community. Be sure to research the environment you are operating in.

- Please make sure that if you are copying and pasting from other proposal templates you update your narrative to ensure continuity throughout. Be detail oriented.

- Lastly, if you are using a grant writer please make sure this consultant knows your organization well and can speak to various facets of the operation. If not, please do not make them your primary contact person.

How does a board member review a solicitation differently than a staff member?
The board is involved at various points throughout the process, whereas my involvement is from beginning to end. So my relationship to the organization is different.

My role, besides ushering the process, is that of an advocate and not a decision maker. All final funding decisions lie with the board.

Do you find stories/anecdotal information helpful in a request for funding?
I think stories can be useful but I think it's important to find the right balance between the anecdotes and the case for support. Out LOI form is brief and because it is the first opportunity to present the organization, it is more important to make the case for support (as I talked about earlier in our conversation) because a site visit will provide the opportunity to highlight successes.* That being said, if a success can be included in a brief way, it can help the narrative.

At the end of the day, the foundation wants to help children, youth and their families. So tell us how you do that.

* *All applicants invited to submit a full grant application receive a site visit from Rachel.*