



Ask the Consultant

“If a funder doesn’t understand how crucial our work is, we need to educate them, right?” It’s a question we’ve heard in various forms, over the years, and we decided it was time to respond via an Ask-the-Consultant issue of our e-newsletter.

Firstly, it’s true, of course, that thoughtful communication is essential to ensure funding prospects understand how your work fits with their vision and priorities.

It’s also true that funders are typically eager to learn more about the issues they find important — and to understand how they can use their resources to make the biggest impact. What they learn influences their funding priorities over time. Recently, for example, we’ve seen a more intense focus on issues of equity, as a result of institutional funders’ ongoing learning and strategic planning.

But consider this scenario: Organization A provides advocacy services regarding access to health care. They identify Funder B as a prospect. While Funder B awards grants only for direct health services for the medically indigent, Organization A feels that explaining the importance of their advocacy work will convince Funder B to support it.

Our experience shows that this approach is unlikely to succeed. In truth, institutional funders in particular are typically very intentional in setting their priorities — and they’ve carefully considered how best to achieve their goals. Organization A might certainly choose to provide Funder B with information about its work, perhaps by sharing its news publication or other materials. However, Organization A will be more successful if it focuses its finite resources on approaching prospects that are *already interested* in the kind of work it does.

In short, take a cold, hard look at whether and how your work fits the priorities of the funder you’re approaching. It’s fine to think creatively: Does your gang prevention program also impact participants’ literacy levels? A funder who has no specific focus on gang prevention may nonetheless be willing to fund your literacy-related services. But it’s important to avoid the following thinking: *“If only we could get funders to understand why our work is important, they’d make an exception to their priorities and fund us.”* Instead, spend time to research and reach out to your natural partners.

Learn how Thurlow/Associates can help you identify your natural funding partners — and how we can help you with donor outreach — by calling us at (310) 675-6497 or emailing us at hello@thurlowassociates.com.