

Grant Writing for Non-Profits

Claudine Land:

Hello everyone and welcome to the Virtual Ingenuity Business Podcast. Our guest today is Lara Allen. She's the owner of Nonprofit Navigators. Lara has a degree in broadcast journalism and worked for a few years as a national radio news reporter before making her career shift to full-time ministry. She served as a live-in assistant director in a transitional home for teen mothers, and then served alongside her husband in a sober living program. Here, they lived among people recovering from addictions for more than six years even through the births of both of her children. She learned to write grants when her children were babies, and then shifted back to the business world, starting her own non-profit consulting and grant writing business.

As her family grew, Lara added clients and then staff. This business, Nonprofit Navigators, is now 14 years old. Lara moved from Denver, Colorado to Birmingham, Alabama in 2018 with one staff member, and now she leads an entire team of 10 employees living in five different states. How amazing is that? Lara loves helping many non-profits accomplish their various missions, and I know for a fact that Lara loves what she does, genuinely loves what she does. Welcome to the Virtual Ingenuity Business Podcast, Lara.

Lara Allen:

Thank you. Thank you so much for having me, Claudine.

Claudine Land:

I'm so excited to have you here today. And we're going to talk about grant writing for non-profits. Every now and then, Lara, I come across a non-profit organization that would like assistance writing a grant and Nonprofit Navigators. You all write grants for non-profits, or 501(c)(3) entities, correct?

Lara Allen:

Yes.

Claudine Land:

Okay. So let's clarify this. For those individuals that may be a little bit confused or need some clarification, what is the difference between a non-profit, which is a 501(c)(3) entity, and a foundation?

Lara Allen:

Both of them technically are not for-profit, but they are different according to tax code and several different ways. A 501(c)(3) organization is the one you normally would think of as a non-profit. They're the ones that are actually doing the work. There are big well known ones like Salvation Army and American Heart Association, and then there are really millions across the country in the world that are small to medium size, doing the good work of tutoring children, caring for people who are homeless, arts programs to say people caring for people who are disabled, education, just a myriad of things, even

carrying for dogs and stray dogs and things like that. You'll all kinds of different non-profit organizations. So they're the ones that are actually doing the work, running the programs.

In contrast, a foundation is an organization that exists to give financial grants to these non-profits typically set up by a person or a family or a corporation, and they want their money to support certain types of causes long after their death, usually if it's set up by a family member or a person who wants their legacy to live on. And the foundation, each one has its own guiding principles. They have their own things they want to fund and areas of focus. They have their own guidelines. Some of them receive proposals through an online portal, and some take written, mailed, or emailed applications. But the trick is finding the foundation that cares about the cause that your nonprofit does. So that's the fun puzzle that we put together.

Claudine Land:

That's right. And having a great foundation donate to a non-profit is just wonderful. And also, non-profits are usually tax-exempt, right?

Lara Allen:

They always are, yes.

Claudine Land:

Okay. Great. And then some of the similarities though, is that they both engage in charitable activities, something that could maybe help the community.

Lara Allen:

Right

Claudine Land:

All right. So we know that capturing grant funding can be highly competitive. We've both written grants in the past. Well, I've written grants in the past for 10 years or so, and crafting a compelling grant proposal is imperative to getting that grant notice. And there's also quite a bit of research that goes into writing a grant. So how can a 501(c)(3) or a non-profit organization increase its chances, Lara, of receiving a grant?

Lara Allen:

Well, what we've learned is it's important from the very beginning to make sure a non-profit is ready to apply for a grant, ready to successfully apply for a grant. So my team at Nonprofit Navigators, we're experts in ensuring that non-profits have the best chance of receiving grants before they go through all the work that's required to apply. So when we start working with a non-profit client, our first step is a discovery and analysis process, and we take non-profits through a grid. We want to ask them all kinds of questions about their programs and their evaluation, what are the ways that they evaluate, how successful things are, and their financials. We're kind of measuring them against the standard that we

call indicators of a healthy fundable non-profit. So if you want me to go through a few of those steps, those indicators...

Claudine Land:

Yes. I would love for you to do that. And Lara, you also mentioned something that's key. Your financials. It's really important to get your financials in order and have that business plan that really explains your financials, right?

Lara Allen:

Right. You need to think about how a foundation wants to invest in something that's going to be successful, something that's actually going to make a difference in someone's life, and invest in an entity that really takes care of their financials well, that is wise with financials and is not going to just waste or squander what they give them. So we take them through these steps and try to determine where they are in these different areas. So we want to look for a non-profit that can explain exactly who their target clients are. Are they serving adults or children? What ages? What demographics? Are there people from a certain city or zip code? You need to be able to explain who it is you serve. And then what do those people need? And is this service that the non-profits are providing, actually solving a problem for them?

It may seem obvious, and to the person who came up with the idea for the non-profit, they say, "Yes, of course", but we need to be able to really prove the point, prove the case.

Claudine Land:

That's right. Yes.

Lara Allen:

So we're looking for clear outcomes-based programs. We're looking for programs that are evidence-based, or maybe they've been the same type of program that has been successful in another area of the country. So you're taking lessons from that. Are they gathering accurate and relevant demographic data? Are they paying attention to who they serve and how many and the outcomes and things like that. And then the evaluation systems are really important. Are your evaluation systems measuring whether your program is beneficial? So we help with all those pieces of the things that, if those things are not, if we say, "This isn't very clear, let's write this differently, or Let's actually help you design some evaluation systems that will measure the effectiveness of your program", we can help with that before we write the grant.

Claudine Land:

Okay. That's great.

Lara Allen:

And then we also want to see if they have a board of directors that's very active and engaged, not just names only. People who show up to meetings, people are helping fundraise, helping run the program, that kind of thing, that is very beneficial for grant funding. They're looking for diverse funding streams.

Most foundations do not want to be your only source of income. They want to see, do you have the support of the community? Do you have people who jump in and corporations and churches and things like that. And just like you mentioned before, solid financials, they want to see, do you have more money coming in than going out? Do you have a logical budget that makes sense? And it's easy to read. And typically they want to see three to six months of expense in the bank to show stability.

Claudine Land:

That's very important. You have to show progress and stability. Yes, I agree. So I want to also mention that some people or some non-profits will seek professional help from an external source, such as a fundraising consultant, and some may actually choose not to do that, but they'll usually have a specific grant writer within their non-profit. They could have their fundraising director, executive director, or even their board members or stakeholders assist in writing a grant. But for those individuals, Lara, that need help and an external funding company to help them write a grant, how do grant writers normally get paid for writing a grant? I know that when I used to write grants, they were just different ways to get paid. Some grant writers... Let's talk about that.

Lara Allen:

Yes. Nonprofit Navigators has a set fee for our discovery and analysis process. And then the next step after that is to find good foundation prospects. So we have a set fee for our foundation's search, and we have a membership or a subscription to several different national databases so we can find good foundations for you to go for. We come up with a great schedule and all that kind of thing. So that is a set fee for that project as well. And then we just charge hourly for all the consulting and grant writing after that. So a common misconception is that grant writers get paid a percentage of the grants reported. And it is not ethical and it's completely unacceptable according to Grant Professionals Association and some other professional organizations. So there are several reasons, I know you already know this, but there are a lot of factors that go into whether a grant is actually received or actually awarded or not. And most of those factors actually can't be controlled by the grant writer.

It has to be a program. It has to do with how much money they have to give. It has to do with the focus area of the foundation at that time and things like that. To the grant writing process and all the consulting that goes along with it is valuable to the non-profit and helps them grow and improve whether they receive the grant or not. The consultant's time, expertise, and knowledge should be compensated. And when a grant is given, the foundation expects that money to be used for the program and the proposal described. So it would be unethical for a portion of it to go to a grant writer. So that's why we charge for the work we do. And we have a really great ROI anyway.

Claudine Land:

And that's return on investment for those of you that are not sure what an ROI is.

Lara Allen:

Yes. Yes. So it's measured various ways, but we are pretty confident that our clients, because we're taking them through such a grid and such a rigorous process up front, and we're only finding foundations that are a really super great fit for them, we have a pretty good return on the amount of

money that our clients give us. That being said, you do have to pay up front. It's an investment in your organization without a complete guarantee, but a pretty good chance. Does that sound good?

Claudine Land:

And you did mention this, Lara, that it's important that when you're applying for a grant, it's not about asking for money, it's about the impact that when you receive that funding, the impact that it will make in the community. And it's really imperative to address the important issues within that community and how the money is going to affect or help the community and the type of grant that you want, rather than your service, is what I'm trying to say. How it's going to effectively help the community and spread awareness of an issue that is really of significance.

Lara Allen:

Yes

Claudine Land:

And what that issue is really depends on the grant, funding source, or the grant entity. And it's important to be really clear on how that money is going to be spent because it is money that funding source is giving to you and your organization.

Lara Allen:

That's so crucial.

Yeah, it really is crucial. We need to really focus on that community impact. And sometimes, I know from writing grants, I used to write grants for major medical institutions, and it's really important to focus on that, to focus on that community impact.

Lara Allen:

Right. And we're finding more and more foundations require a grant report a year later.

Claudine Land:

They do. Yes.

Lara Allen:

And they're requiring very detailed budgets. So you have to give them a budget for the program, a piece of the program that you're requesting money from. And then a year later, you are accountable to that. Did you spend the money that way? And not only did you spend the money that way, were the people impacted or helped the way you said they would be helping? How many people did you actually serve? How did they improve when you did a pre or post-survey? Did you see improvement in what they learned or what they experienced and all that kind of thing? I feel like foundations are holding non-profits to a higher standard than they have in the past in some ways. And that's a positive thing.

It makes us grow up as non-profits and make sure we are being effective, which we all want to be. We don't want to spin our wheels when we start a non-profit organization. We don't want to think that

we're just out here doing work every day. It really is encouraging, even though it's a pain, it feels like a pain to take all those notes and collect all that data. It's honestly encouraging to the non-profit leaders and the program directors when they can look back and go, "Oh, look what we did. Look at these people we've helped. Look at the way the lives are changed", because that's why we got into it in the first place.

Claudine Land:

Yes. The data has to be measurable, as you said, for sure.

Lara Allen:

It doesn't sound fun, but it's good.

Claudine Land:

Well, it's not fun, but it's good. Having been there. But it's great in the long run. And then you never know if that funding source could get another grant from them in the future as well. I've had that happen.

Lara Allen:

It's really a lot about relationships. And once you get in their cycles and get to know the people a little more, you can roll with it. And it could be very steady funding source for you for years.

Claudine Land:

And Nonprofit Navigators, you all are really familiar with those grant entities as well. You guys have built that relationship.

Lara Allen:

Right. The benefit of hiring an organization like ours is that we are in the trenches as far as knowing what funding sources are out there and what they like. If we're writing a grant for several different non-profits to the same foundation year after year or something like that, we get them. We understand what they like, we know how they want to be approached. We know all those kind of things. Our sweet spot for a client is usually a smaller to medium range, maybe a \$500,000 to \$2 million budget, because those are the ones that seem to have a smaller staff. The development director or the executive director is wearing a lot of hats. And if we can take this grant writing piece off their plate, it's cheaper for them than to hire someone full-time to do it. And it's more effective because that's all we do every day. And I have a great team that can do a lot of different things.

Claudine Land:

You do. From Colorado to Birmingham as well. That's really important. And you guys know how to tailor the grant proposal too? How to communicate those ideas clearly.

Lara Allen:

We don't do cookie-cutter. We definitely look at the actual, what does that foundation care about? And how do we show that this program matches what they care about?

Claudine Land:

And you all are great because you adhere to the funder's specific proposal requirements, which if non-profit tries to write the grant themselves, they may overlook that because every application format is different. Every submission process is different. And they're all kinds of attachments that go along with submitting a grant.

Lara Allen:

It's true. Every time you think that you've caught every question there is, someone comes up with a new question.

Claudine Land:

Yes. That's right.

Lara Allen:

It's like, we haven't come across that question before, what?

Claudine Land:

And so Lara, I'm so glad that you told us a little bit about your process. Is there anything else that you wanted to add to that, your process with Nonprofit Navigators?

Lara Allen:

I was trying to think.

Claudine Land:

You could also tell the listening audience, where can we find you?

Lara Allen:

Oh, sure. It's nonprofitnavigators.net. So we have clients that jump on with us for the long haul. I have a client that I started with 14 years ago, they're still with me. And then we have others that come and go for just short-term projects. If you have a grant writer or you like to do it yourself at your non-profit maybe, we offer a la carte services, we would just maybe review your proposal. A lot of people want us to just do a search for you. We have, like I said, a subscription to two different national databases, and they're kind of expensive. So maybe a non-profit doesn't want to pay for that membership for a year-long to do a good search.

They can pay us to do it for them using our membership that we have and our expertise and our prior knowledge of what we already know about what foundations are giving to what, especially in Birmingham and Denver, which are our sweet spots. But we do take clients from other parts of the country. So we'll do that full search for you and just present you with a year-long schedule, the deadlines, the application guidelines, and all that kind of thing. And you can run with that if you want to. We'll do an attachments review for you. That would be another one-time thing.

Claudine Land:

That's great.

Lara Allen:

We'll look at your financials and your budget and your board list and all those things for you and give you feedback so that we can be your eyes before the funder sees it. And we're going to give you some red flags, "Hey, you might want to adjust this", and some advice on what you might want to just adjust a little bit before you send that proposal out. Either the proposal review, the attachments review, or both. If there's a big one that you're working on that your eyes are going cross side, because you've looked at it way too many times and you're the only grant writer in your office, send it to us. Let us give you a review of it, and we would be delighted to do that. So we offer several different ways. And then like I said, we have our long-term clients that we do the whole process for them, discovery and analysis, foundation search, and ongoing grant writing and consulting for years and years and years. We take care of the deadlines for you.

Claudine Land:

Okay. Thank you so much, Lara. So we're going to close with this. If our listeners could have one takeaway from what we talked about today, what would that one takeaway be?

Lara Allen:

Yes. Grants are an important piece of a non-profit fundraising strategy, but it's not easy money. Your best chance of success would be to work with professional grant strategist, I'm saying the word wrong, strategist, who can help you with the whole process from program design and evaluation all the way through writing and proposal.

Claudine Land:

Yes. And I want to add to that. Your funding sources will be more eager to fund a non-profit if that organization can show an innovative approach to a problem. Remember that it's not just about asking for money, but you've got to come up with and illustrate a new, unique, and effective way of handling that problem, that problem area with an advantage.

Lara Allen:

That's a perfect takeaway. Yes.

Claudine Land:

Okay. So I want to really stress that because sometimes I think that non-profits lose site of that and just think, "Okay, well, we need money." It's not just about the money.

Lara Allen:

Yes. Exactly. You got it.

Claudine Land:

So Lara, what is the one piece of advice that you wish someone had given you when starting your business 14 years ago?

Lara Allen:

Yes, I love this. Build a team earlier. That's what I wish I would've done and wish someone would've told me. I spent years riding alone in my basement and I really got drained. I started to hate it honestly. Years ago, I was going, "This is not for me." I'm just trudging away in my basement by myself and I'd much rather interact with people. So I started hiring people who are smarter than me in various areas. That was the best thing I ever did, and honestly was advice that was given to me. My business exploded. I'm having so much more fun. We're able to offer our clients such a better service because of the brilliant people on my team, and of course, you can make more money and serve more clients when there are more people providing services. So, build a team earlier is what I wish I would've done, and I'm glad I did it now.

Claudine Land:

I agree with you and I cannot stress it enough, outsource and build your team. Just know your strengths and weaknesses.

Lara Allen:

Do what you're great at. Do what they're great at. That's my favorite thing, is figuring out where people shine, what they're made to do, and then putting them in those places and letting them do it.

Claudine Land:

That's right. I agree a hundred percent with that.

Lara Allen:

I'm having so much more fun than being the one trudging away writing the grants.

Claudine Land:

That's right. You can relax a lot more, can't you?

Lara Allen:

Yes

So again, my friends, nonprofitnavigators.net, Lara Allen and her team are wonderful. They work with non-profits to help you write that tailor-made grant for your non-profit organization. Lara, thank you so much for being a guest on the Virtual Ingenuity Business podcast. I always enjoy talking with you. I love it when we come together and chat about grants.

Lara Allen:

Yes, I loved it so much. Thank you for having me, Claudine.

Claudine Land:

Oh, you're welcome. It's always a pleasure.

So guys, until next time, let's impact together virtualingenuityllc.com.

We'll see you next time. Thanks so much. Bye.