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To Improve Your Chances of Winning a G.O.S. Grant, Learn to Prepare the Strongest, Most Competitive Application Possible

By Burt Logan

When barely a third of the applications for General Operating Support are successful, it might seem to some museum professionals that it's virtually impossible to obtain these grants from the Institute of Museum Services (I.M.S.). Difficult? Yes. Impossible? No—especially when you learn how the awards are made and how your museum can improve its chances for funding.

First, let's discount some myths that might be discouraging some museums from applying for grants. The amount of money you ask for does not affect the awarding of grants, as long

as the request is within I.M.S. guidelines (no more than 10 percent of your organization's general revenue for the most recently completed fiscal year, up to a maximum grant of \$75,000). During the past 11 years, I.M.S. has awarded grants up to \$75,000 as requested and justified by applicants.

Equally unimportant are the size and reputation of your museum, because General Operating Support is awarded for the quality of operations and services an applicant provides to its audiences. Each year's award list includes small museums with audiences consisting mostly of local residents, as well as some of the nation's largest institutions with collections of international prominence.

An applicant's previous history of General Operating Support (G.O.S) funding also is of

little consequence. In any given year, a museum that has received several consecutive annual grants might be unsuccessful while another museum, fruitless in several previous attempts, might suddenly be funded. If these factors neither harm nor enhance a museum's application, what can be done to improve the chances of funding? The best way is to understand the application and review process and then to prepare the strongest, most competitive application.

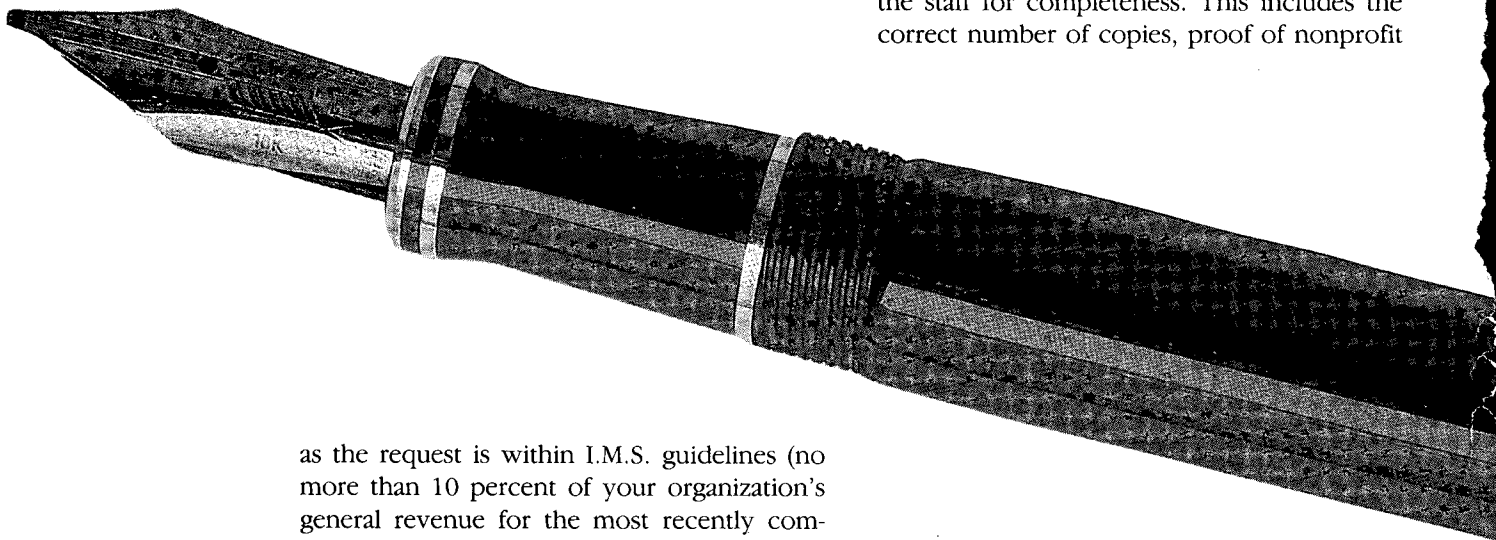
Master the Process

As applications are received at the I.M.S. office in Washington, D.C., they are checked by the staff for completeness. This includes the correct number of copies, proof of nonprofit

status, all required supporting documentation, and appropriate signatures. Applications are not routinely reviewed and evaluated by the I.M.S. staff. The staff members do, however, evaluate the processing of the applications. In addition, they help unsuccessful applicants better understand the reviewers' comments in order to improve subsequent applications.

After an application is determined to be

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complete, it is assigned to a panel of four field reviewers. Each reviewer must have a minimum of three years' experience in the museum profession, be currently employed by a museum, and be willing and able to serve on the panel. Applications are assigned to reviewers by the applicant museum's discipline and size of its annual budget. Reviewers act independently of each other and do not know the identities of the others constituting the panel.

I.M.S. maintains a list of potential reviewers that is continually updated. Prospective reviewers are asked a month before the application deadline to serve as field reviewers for that year's grant cycle. After accepting the I.M.S. offer, each reviewer receives approximately 12 applications eight weeks after the application deadline. Applications then are reviewed and ratings returned to I.M.S. approximately five weeks later. I.M.S. carefully evaluates the quality of each reviewer's ratings and comments; those who demonstrate minimal commitment to the review process or fail to follow instructions are not asked to serve as reviewers again.

To develop a feel for all applications, reviewers are instructed to read them through in their entirety without assigning any ratings. Having acquired a familiarity with the entire group, the reviewer then rereads each application carefully and assigns a numerical score in each of nine categories. Then, all applications are again reviewed as a group and minor adjustments made as needed.

The nine categories correspond to the prin-

ments justify the scores and help applicants know what they are doing right or wrong.

As explained to each applicant in the annual G.O.S. grant application and information packet, "Applications are scored on the basis of the relative quality of the applicant museum as it is represented in the responses to the narrative questions. Quality is determined by the degree to which the applicant demonstrates its knowledge of and adherence to generally accepted professional standards of museum operations. In the context of I.M.S. competition, quality is the judicious management of the museum's available resources to provide the best possible services to its community and the general public. Quality is not defined by the applicant's size and amount of resources, but rather by what effective use it makes of existing resources to fulfill identified purposes."

The possible scores for the nine categories range from 1 to 7. A rating of 1 indicates the "applicant's response demonstrates unsatisfactory performance when measured against generally accepted professional standards in this area of services/operations"; a score of 7 means the "applicant's response demonstrates leadership in this area of services/operations when measured against generally accepted professional standards." Each of the nine sections is scored independently of the others.

Sheets with scores and comments are returned to I.M.S. for final processing. To ensure confidentiality, I.M.S. requires reviewers to destroy copies of the applications after 30 days.

When I.M.S. receives the rating sheets, the staff scans them for completeness. Each reviewer's scores are entered into a computer and processed to reduce the bias of reviewers who tend to use only high or low scores. Each

incipal parts of the application: audience, collections, collections care and management, exhibits, education and research, staff and physical facilities, support, administration, and long-range plans. For each area, the reviewer assigns a numerical score and writes a short comment to substantiate the score. The com-

application receives an average "standardized" score that determines its rank. The final result is a rank-order listing by average "standard-

ized" score for all applications in the current year's competition. Potential grantees then are identified, beginning with the highest average score through the point at which money appropriated for that fiscal year's program runs out.

This preliminary funding slate then is forwarded to the G.O.S. review panel, a multidisciplinary panel selected from the I.M.S. pool of exceptional field reviewers. They review the application process and the distribution of awards by discipline, budget size, and geographical area. Additionally, the panel considers applications in which a sharp divergence of reviewers' opinions creates a discrepancy in the scoring. The panel may make recommendations about such applications that could mean changing their places on the funding slate. Official grant awards are made by the director of I.M.S., after consultation with the National Museum Services Board, a 15-member body appointed by the President.

What Reviewers Look For

This explanation of the review and selection process might remove several veils of mystery. However, to improve your chances of receiving a G.O.S. grant, you need to understand what reviewers look for in an application.

The first impression a reviewer receives is of the form, organization, and neatness of an application. As taught in virtually every composition class, a written piece that is orderly and projects a polished image immediately makes a favorable impression. Regardless of its content, a disorganized, poorly prepared application will pale when compared with one done in a professional manner. Also, an inadequate application may cause the reviewer to suspect the applicant's ability to manage federal funds in a responsible manner.

Within the body of the application, all questions should be answered completely and according to the instructions. This includes ensuring that all parts of the application are equally strong. Applicants must bear in mind that each major question consists of several subquestions. For example, Section I of the 1988 application was labeled "Audience." This section in turn comprised three subsections which asked: What is the museum's audience? What is the museum's schedule for public visitation and other activities? And what are the levels of public participation in the services the museum provides? Strong scores earned by convincing answers to the first and second parts of this question could be reduced significantly because of an incomplete or inadequate

answer to the third part.

As each section is addressed, the application should become unified and exhibit a continual flow of information and thought. Answers should not be disjointed but should reinforce and support other parts of the application whenever possible. A competitive application presents a thorough, detailed, and convincing explanation of a museum. If the reviewers were to enter the museum, they should feel, only from having read the application, that they already know the organization intimately.

At the same time, answers must reflect an overall understanding of museum philosophy and operations that is applied in a realistic and workable context. Answers that try to impress the reviewer with endless textbook recitations often fail. Specifics that demonstrate the understanding and use of appropriate techniques are absolutely necessary. Few reviewers will give full credit to the statement that a museum "has a professional system to accession, catalogue, and deaccession objects." The procedure must be explained in sufficient detail to convince the reader that the system is indeed professional.

Although the application must be detailed, the detail should be presented without using jargon. Clear and concise sentences are best.

Applications also should show improvement in succeeding years, both in the operation of the museum and in the application itself. It is possible for a reviewer to be assigned an application from a particular museum in consecutive years. Reviewers are not supposed to apply prior knowledge when evaluating an application, but if a reviewer receives an application from a museum which he or she has reviewed in the past, it might be difficult to disregard major deficiencies when no improvement has been shown.

Obviously, every shortcoming cannot be corrected in one year. The competitive application tells the reviewer, however, that the museum recognizes the deficiency and is in the process of correcting it. The most competitive applications are thoroughly revised, updated, and improved each year, regardless of the applicant's past success.

Comments from previous I.M.S. reviews, if applicable, should be used to improve the application and the museum. All four review sheets are returned to every applicant each year for this use.

To enhance the long-term competitive edge of the museum, your institution should assess its strengths and weaknesses. The applicant should take every opportunity to emphasize the museum's strong points, while stating how

deficiencies will be remedied. Weaknesses should not be ignored or hidden. Reviewers seldom will penalize an application for identifying a problem area when a realistic and attainable solution is also presented.

Consultant services also can help a museum assess its condition. The Museum Assessment Program (MAP), funded by the I.M.S. and operated by I.M.S. and the American Association of Museums, provides an excellent opportunity for an outside consultant to review the overall organization of a museum. A companion program, MAP II, reviews a museum's collection management practices. Many successful museums use these consultations to strengthen their overall operations by mapping strategies for the future. In addition, the G.O.S. application should state that a MAP visit or other consultation has occurred. The general findings and recommendations, along with the museum's past or future use of the recommendations, should be mentioned.

Above all else, a reviewer expects to see high standards of honesty and professional ethics. Nothing in the application should cause the reader to doubt the integrity, intentions, or reputation of the museum.

Learn to Enhance Your Chances

Based on the insights I've gained as a reviewer of G.O.S. grant applications, here are nine recommendations for improving your museum's application and increasing your chances of success:

1. *Always read the instructions and study the application booklet before beginning to work on the application.* The application format and the questions asked have evolved as I.M.S. has refined its procedures and responded to current professional museum standards. Also review the specific parts of each question that must be answered.

2. *Always describe the museum in the best possible terms without being boastful.* Arrogance and undeserving praise are obvious and impress few reviewers. However, a strong, confident presentation that clearly describes the quality of the museum will enhance the application.

3. *Be as accurate and thorough as possible.* The reviewer's only knowledge of the museum is likely to be based on what is contained in the application. Do not assume the reviewer has any previous knowledge of your museum.

4. *Make the quality of the museum evident in the quality of the application.* Simple declarative sentences are most effective. Do not ask for thousands of dollars in government support with an application that has mis-

spelled words, poor sentence structure, and other glaring grammatical deficiencies.

5. *Begin preparing the application early.* With few exceptions, the quality of the final product is directly proportional to the amount of time spent preparing it.

6. *Ask for a sample application if needed.* I.M.S. keeps exemplary applications on file by budget size and category of museums. In preparing your first G.O.S. application, you might wish to request a sample to read and study. Applicants, however, should not repeat verbatim the words of others; each application must be individually prepared.

The application should take every opportunity to emphasize your museum's strong points, while simultaneously stating how deficiencies will be remediated. Weaknesses should not be ignored or hidden. Reviewers seldom penalize an application for identifying a problem if a solution also is presented

7. *Discuss each question with others before preparing the application.* Although the author—as director, president, or principal volunteer—knows the overall organization better than anyone else, it helps to brainstorm answers. This is especially true for detailed information concerning the financial statements and for yearly statistics.

8. *Make the application a year-round process.* Keep a grant file into which you drop monthly visitation statistics, changes in organizational structure or organization, summaries of events, programs and special projects, and other appropriate information. Then, each autumn, open the file to find much of the information you need.

9. *Remember that the ability and writing style of the author is reflected in the application.* You might want to have someone else prepare the application, but as director, be sure to review and edit the final draft.

The G.O.S. application and review system is not perfect. However, by learning about the review process and preparing strongly competitive applications you can significantly improve the chances of obtaining G.O.S. funding for your museum. □