

LESSONS FROM THE FIELD: THE CRITICAL 'HUMAN' ELEMENT TO SUCCESSFUL ONLINE GRANTMAKING

Background

When the Surdna Foundation, a large family foundation with approximately \$750 million in assets and annual giving topping \$30 million, decided to consider online grantmaking they knew they needed a process overhaul. The Foundation had a critical need to centralize and standardize their grant application and review methods. With about 1,700 proposals received each year and approximately 400 grants awarded, Surdna's two-stage application process was decentralized. Proposals were submitted through a combination of mail, email, and unsolicited letters of inquiry directed to various staff members.

Surdna knew that taking the application process online was going to be successful only with careful thought and planning. Some of the key questions they had to answer were: What's broken? Will it save time? What will online grantmaking enhance? Do these pluses add up to a net gain? The project needed to serve both the applicants and help streamline the review process for the foundation.

"Our previous method became cumbersome to us — it was longer, and more drawn-out with poor feedback from potential grantees," states Jonathan Goldberg, grants administrator and manager of information systems at the Surdna Foundation. "We ended up with proposals getting buried on desks, incomplete information creating lots of back and forth between staff members and applicants, and a lag in

communication with our applicants." And while the Foundation accepted only invited full proposals, there was no standard format for them.

Through online grantmaking, the Surdna Foundation created significant efficiencies in their process — saving time on data input, improving grantee communications, and making board book preparation easier — areas that were consuming a great deal of staff time. But they also

learned a few lessons along the way. Grantmakers considering an online process can learn a lot from the Surdna Foundation's experience. Here they have shared some valuable lessons learned while bringing their grantmaking to the Web.

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The Online Experience — How They Did It The Technology

For many funders, the primary concern about going online is technology. Legitimate concerns include how to amass and assemble an integrated solution that works with existing systems; whether this new technology will work as promised; and whether the setup and maintenance will overburden staff members who are tasked with this responsibility. And will it truly provide 24x7 accessibility?

"For us, the technology was the easiest part," asserts Jonathan. Surdna's solution worked as expected and the setup was relatively hassle-free. But there were other issues they encountered along the way.

The People & The Process

One of the most important pieces of advice, suggests the Surdna Foundation, is to pay close attention to staff and grantees throughout the planning and implementation process. Listen carefully to everyone, because developing effective communication was Surdna Foundation's single greatest challenge to creating a successful online grantmaking program.

Buy-in from staff is critical to success

Surdna Foundation is considered by many to be a technologically advanced foundation. But even so, they did not underestimate the importance of obtaining buy-in from all staff members. "Getting people to make this kind of a change is a big leap," declares Jonathan. "It helped that we had support from the top, but even so it still takes a lot of explaining, listening, compromise and time." Every staff member, including administration, provided input and ideas. While it took more time than anticipated, it was worth it — the end result was a collaborative effort that reflected the organization's best practices in all areas.

Language and communications is the biggest challenge

An arduous part of going online is making Web-based communications very clear, because the written word sometimes lacks the ability to place things in context. "And there is a psychological phenomenon when people fill out information online to take shortcuts," adds Jonathan. It was necessary to press applicants to carefully read and consider what they were writing online. In fact, the Foundation's application forms actually provide the first part of the sentence for applicants, such as "the purpose of the grant is to . . ." This yields the third-person language the Foundation requires, and in doing so they now take a great deal of information directly from applicants and deliver it to the board in a standardized format, to minimize formatting and editing.

Work, re-work & field test your applications

Before Surdna Foundation went live with online applications, they asked staff members and trusted grantees to look at it, try it out and submit feedback. These field tests yielded valuable responses that Surdna staff members discussed and considered in frequent meetings. As a result, the Foundation made numerous changes to their application forms and their process in order to make things clearer and simpler for

everyone. Even so, when going live the process was not perfect the first time around—so grantmakers should expect to make some ad hoc adjustments.

Pay Close attention to Website content

Surdna took the time to thoroughly consider things from the grantee's perspective. Often, what you think is obvious is not so for the grantee. The look of the Website and how links are presented are very important.

For example, potential grantees that submitted letters of inquiry and received an invitation for a full proposal were often returning to the Web site and filling out the wrong forms. So the Foundation revamped the website pages related to applying for grants several times to get this right.

"Providing lots of instructions up-front, before they begin filling out forms, helps to address this issue, and it ensures the best possible answers," says Jonathan. "And we also found it extremely helpful to give applicants a preview of what to expect throughout the submission process." Surdna asks applicants to review a .pdf document of the complete application form before beginning proceeding to the form.

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The Online Outcome (continued on next page)

The Online Outcome

At the outset, Surdna Foundation wanted to move to online grantmaking to take advantage of the time-savings it would afford them. In the end, did it? "The data input alone was a big time-saver, since staff members no longer had to input all application data into our grants management system," states Jonathan. And we acquired some additional time-saving features including instant acknowledgements, thereby reducing the number of phone calls from grantees wondering if we received their application. In fact, the Foundation gets many emails letting us know how grateful they are to receive the acknowledgement!" In addition to the time-savings, Surdna Foundation also enhanced their process — now they have a complete electronic record of every grant, better quality applications that can be delivered to the board in a standardized way with minimal effort, and greatly improved access to all grant-related information throughout their organization.

The Solution

Surdna Foundation made online grantmaking possible through the use of MicroEdge IGAM integrated Web forms in combination with GIFTS® powerful and complete grants management system. For more information about these and other solutions, or to read additional client stories:

For additional information contact:

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