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by Liane Reif-lehrer

LETTER

Making Contact

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In her commentary ("[Survival In Today's Tight Funding Climate Depends On Following Agencies' Rules](#)," *The Scientist*, April 29, 1996, page 11), Susan Fitzpatrick says that "the only point on which [her] advice differs from that provided in [my] article [[L. Reif-Lehrer, "Following Instructions Is Critical To Success Of A Grant Application," The Scientist, March 4, 1996, page 15](#)] is on 'networking' with program officers."

This refers to a quote from Janet Rasey, head of the Research Funding Service at University of Washington in Seattle and veteran of two terms on National Institutes of Health study sections. Rasey was referring to the importance of discussing one's research proposal with the program officers of the potential funding agency (specifically NIH) to determine whether the agency is interested in the project. She said in the article, "If there isn't sufficient enthusiasm at this level, there's no point in taking the time and energy to write and submit the application."

"Networking" was perhaps an unfortunate word to use because it has a somewhat negative connotation for some people. But I agree with Rasey that it is important for researchers to make contact with program officers. It's a normal human response for people to be more helpful to someone they know.

Foundation granting procedures are somewhat different from those of federal agencies. In a recent discussion, Rasey pointed out that "foundations have very individual personalities, and sometimes there is a learning curve in determining the best way to deal with each." Moreover, some foundations do not have the personnel to invite discourse with potential grantees. But in my limited experience with private funding agencies, some do invite discussions with applicants, and some even help promising candidates develop their proposals. Rasey says, "After first attempting to determine from the written instructions whether the agency encourages or discourages telephone contact, I would much rather err on the side of calling a program officer when I shouldn't than fail to call when I should have done so."

I agree with Fitzpatrick that applicants should (1) become familiar with the available literature prior to calling an agency and (2) be sensitive to the likelihood that agency personnel are busy. By "networking" with more experienced investigators, younger researchers can often learn which agencies invite pre-submission discussion of their projects and which do not.

Liane Reif-Lehrer
Tech-Write Consultants/Erison Associates
Belmont, Mass. 02178

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