

Hard Data/Soft Data: How they help you build strong proposals

By Norton Kiritz

OPPORTUNITY is a nonprofit organization that has achieved great success in providing services to local youth and their families. Our programs include:

- a teen pregnancy prevention program that has helped participants make healthier choices in their personal relationships
- a very successful workshop program for girls in the community, where the girls tell us they really need these services
- an innovative program for young parents that has improved their self-perceptions and helped them become more effective parents.

-from the opening of a 1995 grant proposal

Proposals often look like the above. Claims are made but no evidence is presented. Success is mentioned but not substantiated. Words like "innovative" go unexplained.

An effective proposal gets beyond the allegation. The applicant provides information to support assertions. Facts and figures are presented in a clear and coherent manner. Words like "success" don't need to be used. The facts speak for themselves.

To use facts instead of fantasy, you must be well prepared for the proposal writing process. As with any other writing, you need source material, which comes in two forms:

1. "Hard data" is what can be described with some specificity, which usually means that it is quantified.

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Statistical information is the most common form of hard data in proposals. Statistics lend an air of validity to your proposal. They suggest that some rigorous procedures are being used at your agency, whether that is true or not.

2. "Soft data" is anecdotal, usually gathered in informal communications, and lacks the rigor that is implied in statistical data. Soft data that is presented well, in the form of quotes and anecdotes, adds context and a particular "feel" to your proposal that can't be matched by any statistics.

An excellent proposal draws on both hard and soft data. We'll focus here on data you need for two components of your proposal. One part is what we at The Grantsmanship Center call the Proposal Introduction. This is the part of your proposal in which you describe your organization and establish its credibility. It is here that you show the reader how accomplished you are in the area in which you are seeking funds.

The second component is the Problem Statement. This is where you spell out the situation that has motivated you to write this proposal--the conditions in your community that you want to help change.

Proposal Introduction

Here is the part of your proposal where you describe your organization as an applicant for funding. This section may be called "applicant agency," "description of the applicant," or "qualifications of the applicant" in formats other than PP&PW (The Grantsmanship Center format). This is where you focus on your agency's background and accomplishments specific to this proposal. It's where you demonstrate to the reader that you are skilled in performing the kind of work that is proposed.

These are some of the source materials you should have on hand in order to provide the hard and soft data that this part of the proposal requires:

Hard Data

- statistics that describe your community and your clientele
- descriptions of each of your current and prior programs, with data on the number of participants and the nature of the services you offer

- follow-up data on current and prior clients
- copies of any formal or informal evaluations of your agency or its programs
- a list of all current and prior institutional donors (corporations, foundations, government agencies)
- a list of agencies that make referrals to your organization and data on the extent of these referrals

Soft Data

- correspondence and verbal feedback from clients, former clients, graduates, etc.--as well as their families
- correspondence and verbal feedback from current and prior donors or grantmakers
- correspondence and verbal feedback from referral sources
- copies of newspaper or magazine stories about your agency, or stories in which it has been mentioned favorably
- awards and commendations received by the agency, staff, and/or board members
- data on visits paid to your agency by representatives of another agency
- information requests you have received from other professionals in your field

Start with this list and construct a list that includes other sources appropriate to your own situation. Now let's see how you might use some of this data in your proposals.

Using Soft Data to Build Credibility

Soft data, often in the form of quotes, not only documents a proposal, but can make it more interesting to the reader. Here are some of the kinds of quotes you might consider using:

Quotes from well-known persons:

"The HIV/AIDS Action Coalition is unique within the AIDS community. It is the only organization in Metropolis run completely by and for people living with AIDS. During a nationwide tour, C. Everett Koop, then Surgeon General of the United States, said, 'As an organization that gives a voice to people living with HIV/AIDS, the Coalition has made a dramatic impact on the entire healthcare system in America. We need to hear from the experts, those who are living with the disease, those who are making a difference in their own lives and their own community...'"

That's a strong quote. It comes as an endorsement, of both a principle and a specific agency. It is from a person of some renown, someone who is a recognized authority in the field of public health. It refers to the grant applicant by name. That is one reason it is so much more compelling than a general statement that says, "People living with HIV/AIDS should be heard from." It is an excellent credibility quote.

Quotes from local elected officials are often included in proposals. Be cautious about how you use them. Some readers may see such quotes as simply the obligation of local politicians to support their constituents. On the other hand, a quote that sounds like more than a boiler-plate endorsement may suggest that an organization is well-known and highly regarded in the community:

"Los Angeles Mayor Richard Riordan called The Center's director, Sister Mary, a 'true inspiration to the community for her loving embrace of those less fortunate.'"

Another source of credibility is the person who has referred someone to your program. Here is an example of some strong testimony that comes from a school counselor who has referred students to an art program:

"I am writing to express my appreciation for your involvement in the life of a student from our school. Several months ago I requested a scholarship to your art program for a boy at my school. His family had been in transition for

several years and had separated. He was quiet, sad and withdrawn. He was having difficulty completing assignments and appeared unmotivated. However, he was interested in art and showed some artistic potential. With five children in his family, paying for art classes was not possible. Your scholarship made a significant impact in this boy's life. He is enthusiastic about his art class. He is smiling as he shares what happened at class or examples of his work. His classroom teacher reports that he is blossoming as he becomes more confident of his artistic ability. I have seen a positive impact in his feelings of self-worth. Your art program has made a difference in his life, and for that I thank you."

Statements from your clients may also convey credibility in a very personal way:

"After 13 years of using alcohol and drugs, I had given up hope for myself and my family. I'd tried everything and even tried to kill myself. Then I heard about the Center... Without the Center and my program I wouldn't have made it this far. I have a chance to live again. I want to share the Center with other women, women who feel as desperate as I once did. I am not a problem now. I'm trying to be a solution to some of society's problems." - Jane Smith

A quote does not have to be very long to make a point

This quote from an elementary school teacher is about a school health program developed by the American Heart Association:

"Your program is a lifesaver. I teach in a country school with no health curriculum or materials. Thank you!"

Whether from a parent, a student, a client, a referring agency, or an authority in the field--this kind of anecdotal data builds credibility. In any proposal, focus on what most supports your work in the area in which funding is being sought. Testimonials to your success in a housing program aren't especially useful if your plan is to provide tutoring services.

No single individual can gather all the source material you need for grant proposals. Some information may come in letters to your agency. Or in feedback after a counseling session. There are probably dozens of quotable statements made to staff of your agency every day. Ask your colleagues to help you by writing them down. Give them a supply of 3x5 cards, and ask them to jot down all those good words they hear as part of their job. Make

sure they include the source (by name or role), the date, and the context. Ask staff, board, and donors if they recall any important events, accomplishments, awards, or successes that could also be used in developing a credibility database for your agency. And where they have any documentation, ask them to forward that to you as well.

Using hard Data to Build Credibility

Absolute statistics present numbers without any comparisons. Here is an example of how absolute statistics are used effectively to convey the scope of an applicant's activities:

"Community Outreach uses a team of 35 volunteers to accomplish its mission. In 1995 the team distributed more than 300,000 food baskets, providing approximately 2,000,000 meals; distributed more than 75,000 items of clothing and, at Christmas time, distributed well over 7,500 toys and gifts. Contributions came from a dozen corporations, the local food bank and United Way, and more than 600 individuals."

Comparative statistics put your situation into context. It is usually more informative to view your situation in relation to that of other organizations. Here is an example of how comparative statistics are used in effectively an agency's prior work in the field:

"In 1990, a study headed by Dr. James C. Smith, Ph.D., President of National University Cancer Institute, showed that across the country, the number of pre-med students expressing interest in cancer research had decreased by 10% each year over the prior five years. In 1994, only 10% of first-year medical students declared oncology as their specialty. This was accompanied by a corresponding drop in the number of medical students interested in cancer research and a drop in the number of oncology residents. Concerned about this decline in cancer research, Dr. Smith began the Cancer Research Development Program (CRDP), to increase the number of medical students and residents focused on cancer research. "A training institute was established in conjunction with the local school district. Eighty high school students with an interest in medicine were invited to participate in a specialized eight-week scientific training program at the University. To date, 410 students have participated in this program. Of this number, 275 have declared a pre-med major. Of these, 69 (nearly 25%) have listed oncology as their major interest. And of the 40 CRDP graduates who have already gone

on to medical school, 12 (30%) have chosen oncology as their specialty. This is more than three times the rate for medical students in general."

Documented evidence of your past success is a very compelling reason for continued support. If you are asking for grant funds to continue your work, or to do related work, the most obvious question is, "What have you already accomplished?"

Some applicants will attempt to demonstrate the economic as well as the social benefit of their work:

"The Probation Department's Electronic Monitoring Project (EMP) is one of the first such programs in the country. Implemented in 1990 as an alternative to detention, it is an out-of-custody, short-term program designed to relieve the overcrowding in Juvenile Hall. Selected offenders are fitted with special anklets which enable staff to electronically monitor their movements in and out of their residences. An average of 17 offenders per month were in the EMP program in 1994, creating a savings of 6,120 Juvenile Hall bed space days and \$753,000 in costs."

An absence of supporting data can create a gap in credibility. Read the following and ask yourself how convincing it is:

"These are some of the similar projects we have conducted in the past:

- 1. Our first project focused on young males and their responsibilities as fathers. This project has been very successful. The participants often comment that they really need these services.*
- 2. Our second project focuses on young females who have school problems. They show visible improvement in attendance and problem-solving skills..."*

Using Soft Data to Document a Problem Statement

The Problem Statement is an essential part of program planning. The Problem Statement describes the situation in your community that you want to change. Poor school performance; a high incidence of health problems; unemployed people who need jobs--all are problems crying out for a solution. When you write a proposal, you need to demonstrate that you have a firm grasp of the problem as it exists in your community. You can demonstrate this by using an appropriate mix of soft and hard data.

Here's how an anecdotal element helps define one Problem Statement:

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"For all the classes I have had in family living, counseling, psychology and the like, no one prepared me to help a woman with black eyes, broken ribs, and a concussion from her violent husband."-- Lt. Joe Robinson, Metropolis Police Department

Compare that with this more conventional definition, which comes from another proposal dealing with the same problem of domestic violence:

"For purposes of this proposal, domestic violence is defined as 'any assault, battery, or any criminal offenses resulting in physical injury or death of one family or household member by another who is or was residing in the same dwelling unit.'"

Which do you think is more effective? The first statement reaches to the heart of the reader. The second tells the reader nothing he doesn't already know. Information culled from the media is another form of soft data:

"For the second straight year, a solid majority of California's 4th, 8th, and 10th graders failed to demonstrate even minimal proficiency in reading, writing and math."

--Los Angeles Times, April 5, 1995

"According to the National Public Services Research Institute, domestic violence costs American businesses more than \$202 billion in medical fees, psychological costs, and productivity over the lifetime of victims. Tragically, the number is actually much higher because violence is rarely mentioned by employees as a reason for missing work or seeking medical attention."

-- Los Angeles Times, January 19, 1995

In some proposals, the anecdotal Problem Statement may be the most effective. This is from a preservation proposal:

"The old man was being interviewed while a group of strangers, aided by the local priest, photographed and inspected the icons in Unalaska's Church of the Holy Ascension. But he grew distracted as strange hands touched the icons. Finally, he leaped up and rushed away to help his priest take a large icon down from the wall. His first priority was the church and what was happening to the icons."

--Anchorage Daily News, December 24, 1989

Using Hard Data to Document a Problem Statement

Hard data, primarily in the form of statistics, lend authority to your problem statement. The best statistics are ones that refer to the people with whom you will be working--the people in your own community. If you describe a national problem when you're dealing with a local situation, you fail to assure the reader that you understand how your own agency will address the problem.

Here's an example of the effective use of both national and local statistics:

"Cardiovascular disease claimed more than 925,000 lives in the United States last year. In 1993, 6,155 Nebraskans died of heart disease--17 people each day. This makes heart disease the number one killer in Nebraska, accounting for 41% of all deaths.

"Unfortunately for our children, heart disease is thought of as an elderly person's disease. In fact, the beginning stages of heart disease occur at a very young age. Lifestyle behaviors and habits are established early and continue through adulthood. Our children are increasingly at risk:

17% to 33% are obese

50% engage in little or no physical activity

4,000,000 children smoke

3,000 children begin smoking each day.

--James Moller, M.D., Pediatric Cardiologist, Univ. Of Minn., 1992

"If health trends remain the same, more than half of Nebraska's children will die of heart disease, and at earlier ages than ever before."

Here's another example of how statistics can help to present the problem in a clear and compelling way. The applicant has found all the necessary data in its own records. That the applicant maintains such detailed information adds even more credibility.

"This project will deal with youth who have been ordered by the court into out-of-home placement, but who are detained in Juvenile Hall awaiting placement. Our Department has noted striking changes in the characteristics

of these offenders over the past 10 years. The mean age of these offenders declined from 16.1 years in 1986 to 15.4 years in 1995; the offenders are now both younger and more violent. In 1995, 46% of these offenders were placed for a serious assaultive offense, including robbery, carjacking, rape and child molestation. Eight percent of the offenders in placement in 1995 were adjudicated for murder or attempted murder and another eight percent for assault with a deadly weapon. All of these figures mark an increase of at least 25% since 1986.

"Overall, in comparison to the 1986 data, offenders awaiting placement in 1995 had a shorter history with the juvenile justice system but had committed more serious offenses. They also had home and social environments which were more dysfunctional. Almost one in five had a documented history of sexual abuse; drug and alcohol abuse by parents was a factor in 50% of the homes; 64% were from single-parent homes and 62% of their families rely on welfare for their subsistence, compared to 22.1% for the general population in the county. One of the most striking changes in these placement cases is that gang membership has increased from 12% in 1986 to 67% in 1995."

This is another example of the effective use of statistics:

"According to the US Forest Service, the number of people using wilderness areas has increased by 10% each year since 1968. The impact of this dramatic rise can be seen in almost every backcountry region of the US. In the Wind River Range of central Wyoming, the 800 students that the Outdoor School annually takes into the range used to makeup 40% of the total person-hours of usage in the range. Today, the same number of students accounts for far less than 1% of the usage. The scars of campfires, latrines, broken branches used for firewood, and refuse are common sights in this once pristine area. Another statistic which tragically substantiates the rise in wilderness use, and the lack of skill in coping with the wilderness, is the increase in backcountry deaths over the past five years. The Bureau of Land Management reports that accidents resulting in death have risen by 250%, from 710 to 1780, during that time."

Just placing statistics in your proposal is no guarantee of success. Sometimes, statistics so confuse the reader that they are better left out of the proposal:

"The National Center for Health Statistics (1990) reports that approximately 25% of teenagers between the ages of 12 and 19 are sexually active. In 1994 over 700 cases of sexually transmitted -- diseases were reported for teens 15

to 19 years of age in our county. Youth in our locale have similar patterns of sexual activity. Reports indicate that 60% of sexually active adolescents who are between the ages of 14 and 15 have been coerced into sexual intercourse.

"Fifty percent of all adolescents in our targeted communities are giving birth on a yearly basis. This number does not reflect miscarriages, abortions and stillborn births. More than 20% of these young women did not receive prenatal care in the first trimester of their pregnancy. In addition, two-thirds of the babies born to these young women are fathered by men at least six years older than they are."

Whatever the writer may be trying to tell us, these statistics don't help. In fact, they hurt. After all, how likely is it that 50% of all the adolescents in these communities are giving birth each year if only 25% are sexually active? And if 50% are boys? When your presentation is as confusing as this one, a reader is likely to conclude that your proposed programs will be just as muddled.

To sum it up, both hard and soft data belong in your proposal. They substantiate your claims of prior success and clarify the problems you intend to try solving. Build a database that includes this kind of information. It will be an invaluable resource when you prepare your grant proposals, and will greatly enhance your chances of funding.