

Preparing Proposals

Introduction

This document is intended to assist you prepare better proposals for funding opportunities, commissions, awards etc. In this article the term “commissioner” is used as a generic term for all people to whom you make a proposal.

Many artists have ambivalent feelings about preparing proposals. On one hand it is an essential skill because most funding opportunities require a formal proposal from an artist. On the other it can be seen as a time consuming exercise which takes the artist away from the “real” work of creating their art. If you want to secure funding (be that a commission, a residency or other) then you are going to have to prepare a proposal that outlines what you want to do, with whom and when in order to begin the conversation with a potential commissioner or funder. Preparing proposals is not rocket science but it is a skill and as such, requires time, patience and research. The common mistakes many artists make in approaching the task of preparing a proposal can be summarised in the following three points:

1. Poor research
2. A “one size fits all” approach
3. Failure to view the process from the commissioner’s perspective

Define Your Project

The first conversation you need to have is with yourself. Why do you want to embark on this particular project? It may seem like an obvious question but it’s essential to know the answer. A project you are undertaking primarily for financial outcomes may require a very different decision to one which will offer you a once-off creative challenge. Ask yourself the following questions:

- What is the purpose of the project?
- What’s the scope of the work?
- What are the broad objectives?
- Who will benefit? (particularly relevant if the work is in a community context)
- What’s the outline time frame?

If you are clear about the intention of your project then it will be easier (a) to select the commissioning opportunities that are best placed to help you realise it and (b) convince the appropriate commissioner to partner you in that realisation.

The Commissioner's Perspective

The commissioner may have very complex social, political, community, aesthetic agendas that are informing their decision to offer funding or a commission at this time. For example, a commission may be offered because it enhances the social or physical profile of a particular community; their interest may be purely creative and aesthetic. These intentions may not compete with each other but a key question for consideration is – can your practice or idea live comfortably side by side with the intentions of the commissioner? Your idea may be very suitable for this process but it is at this point that you need to ask the first of a series of important questions – Is this the right commissioner or process for me? There's no point in trying to mould your idea around the availability of funding if there isn't a “fit”. This generally results in a compromised project from the outset.

Research

Research is a central component of every artist's practice both as it relates to the artwork and the practice of seeking funding. Rather than seeing research as something that detracts from the work it should be seen as something that enhances opportunities for resourcing the work. All commissioning opportunities will have guidelines. In public commissions there will be a formal document available to you, which will outline essential information that you need to read and digest before you set about making a proposal. If the process is less formal then there are other ways of acquiring information about the commissioner.

1. Look at their web site and see what kinds of projects or initiatives they fund; what sorts of communities do they work in and with? Has this person/organisation ever commissioned or funded an artist in the past? Has the commissioner any other sources of funding that might be more appropriate for the project you want to undertake?
2. If there is no website then acquire copies of previous annual reports. Even a casual glance at the quality of the visual material will give you important information about the organisation and its interest in the arts.
3. Look at local government county development and arts plans – this will give you important information on the strategies and priorities for funding at county wide level.
4. Read the Arts Council's website and download the national arts plan 'Partnership for the Arts' and associated documentation outlining national objectives for the arts.
5. Ask artists who have been successful in obtaining commissions or funding for their experiences of working with a particular organisation or commissioner.

If there is a formal process then the guidelines should tell you the following:

- * Who the commissioner is
- * What their motivation for commissioning/funding is
- * The format for applying
- * The level of funding
- * Whom to contact
- * Submission deadlines
- * Eligibility
- * Decision making process

Read the guidelines very carefully. Then read them again. Think of the commissioner as a resource and if you have questions then contact the relevant person in the organisation. It's important that the questions you ask are not seen to be an attempt to canvas on your behalf so be careful about what you ask and of whom. It may also be that you have identified a key question that the commissioner has forgotten to address and they may be

grateful for your attention to detail. Now that you have done some research it's important to revisit your idea and clearly identify the fit between what you want to do and the funding and opportunities that may be available to realise it.

Preparing the Proposal

Commissioners generally require particular types of information. Many artists have a generic proposal that they submit more than once and this is a major mistake. One size does not fit all. Remember – if there is a selection panel there is every chance that someone on that panel may have seen your proposal on a previous occasion. That isn't going to instill confidence in the commissioner that this idea is unique and tailored to their particular context. If you have seriously considered your idea and undertaken your research about the commissioner then you will know whether this commissioning opportunity is worth your time to apply for or not. Take a moment to view this situation from the perspective of the commissioner. They may have gone to considerable trouble to prepare a set of guidelines; perhaps they have also organised a site visit and there is also a contact person to whom questions can be directed. When an artist submits a generic proposal it means they haven't done their homework, the chance they will be unsuccessful increases and time is wasted by everyone. Sending generic proposals can damage your credibility and is bad professional practice.

In summary the kind of information a commissioner requires is:

Your Idea

Be creative, challenging and engaging about your idea. The commissioner will want to be excited about your proposal and this is your opportunity to distinguish yourself from the competition.

Curriculum Vitae

Make sure your CV is up to date and adjusted to fit the project you are proposing. Make it interesting and engaging for the reader by amplifying some of your experience as distinct from merely giving a list of dates and projects.

Artist's Statement

The statement gives you an opportunity to say more about you and your practice outside of the confines of a formal CV. It's important that an artist's statement is engaging, readable and interesting from the perspective of the commissioner who may (or may not) have a formal background in the arts so they may not know who you are or what your process and methodologies are. Help them out and make it easy for them to be curious about you, your idea and your practice.

Budget

The budget is an essential element of your proposal and is, in effect, the financial description of the project. A complete and realistic budget demonstrates to the commissioner that the idea is deliverable; you are a "safe pair of hands" to entrust with the resources and that you have considered the financial as well as creative aspects of the project. The budget outlines the prospective income and expenditure attached to the project; should also indicate any support in kind; and should be based on the most recent research you have done into costs of materials etc. Make sure that estimates you receive are VAT inclusive and indicate in your budget that the costings are for a fixed period of time (i.e. 12 weeks) after which they will have to be rechecked. (E.g. the recent increases in fuel costs would have had a significant impact on a budget which relied heavily on transportation). Keep an updated version of your budget on a spreadsheet (or a package like Quicken) on your computer and amend this as you get more information.

Visual Information

Have good quality visual material and make sure it is relevant to the application. The material should be good examples of your work that amplify your application. Make sure the images are in focus, correctly lit and are in the relevant and appropriate format. There's no point in sending a series of 35mm slides when the selection

panel has a DVD player. Your proposal will look unprofessional and your slides will not give the selectors the information they need to assess your application in the same way as everyone else's. The visual information should be cued up and ready to go (if on video) and accompanied by the relevant applications for viewing. Depending on the project, it may be appropriate for you to produce models, maquettes, CAD drawings or other three dimensional material. If you are unsure, ask the commissioner before you submit your proposal.

The Selection Process

Selection processes vary depending on the commission but they are generally a one stage or two stage process. In the first case your proposal will be evaluated on the basis of what you submit, in the second case your proposal will be short listed and you will be invited to work up a more detailed proposal (including conceptual idea and realisation). In a two stage process you can expect a fee for the additional work involved in this more comprehensive proposal.

Selection panels, particularly for public art commissions, are generally comprised of a representative of all of the major stakeholders. In a local authority context for example this could include: The county architect, an engineer, an elected representative, a representative of the community context in which the work will take place/be sited, professional artists and the public art co-ordinator/arts officer or a professional curator.

The selection panel for any commission will check whether the proposals submitted meet the criteria for inclusion and the relevant material and documentation has been supplied. They will then go on to select the relevant artist to whom the commission will be awarded and will give feedback to those who have not been successful on this occasion.

You can imagine then the types of discussion that the selection panel will engage in – from the aesthetic purpose and value of the work to the practicalities of realising and siting it through to the political and community ramifications. It is a complex and sophisticated process and the more you can do as an artist to evidence the fact that you are cognisant of this complexity the easier it will be for your project to be a serious contender. I am not suggesting that you in any way downplay the creative and aesthetic considerations of your project – but I am suggesting that the context in which that work will be realised will be very present to the selection panel and if you can assist them in imagining its realisation then that can only be a positive contribution. Your ability to make that contribution is directly related to the quality of the research you undertake prior to submitting your proposal.

The important issues for an artist to consider are:

- * Will there be professional arts expertise on the panel?
- * How can I ensure that the quality of my idea and project are communicated clearly when there may be people on the panel who aren't familiar with the arts and in a way which won't compromise my idea?
- * How can I help the panel imagine my work in situ?

Be Professional

You approach the creation of your work with a high degree of professionalism – approach the generation of proposals in the same way. What comes out of an envelope on a commissioner's desk should say as much about you as the work you produce so give yourself a psychological advantage by establishing your credibility as soon as that package is opened.

Make sure that the information you produce is typed, has been proof read, spell checked and is presented in a formal and appropriate way. All basic word processing packages offer templates to guide you but if you are unfamiliar with the relevant formats then ask for help from someone you know. Just because the deadline is next Friday week at 2pm doesn't mean you have to pull an all-nighter the night before. Aim to complete your

proposal a week early, giving yourself enough time to have someone else read and edit for you. If you are applying online then make sure that the material you create can be read and seen on PC and MAC e.g. send written material as a PDF file and include a link to a site where a free Adobe reader can be sourced.

Make sure you put your name on everything and don't send original material unless you are specifically asked to do so. If you do send original material make sure it is insured; you get a signature on delivery and that you supply a mechanism for return.

Finally create a proposal checklist and go through it several times before you send the documentation.

Feedback

If you are successful in your proposal – congratulations! However, this is no time to be complacent. Keep a diary of the entire project (this is of particular importance if this is your first success). Log every call, email and journey you take. Keep detailed accounts of how much you spent and earned and log the time the project took from inception to completion. This is invaluable intelligence for the next proposal you write which will be based on fact rather than fiction.

If you have been unsuccessful then ask for feedback. If you don't know what didn't work this time then how can you improve on that the next time? It may be that your idea was superb but your budget was deemed to be unrealistic; it could be that your idea was seen before by the panel and not considered to be original or appropriate for this context; it could be that a key piece of information required by the commissioner was omitted by you from the proposal. Wouldn't it be a shame not to know what didn't work in your favour if it was something really simple you could amend immediately? Many artists don't ask for feedback and it is the single most important and relevant piece of information you can use to improve your chances of success next time.

Conclusion

Yes – preparing proposals is a time consuming process. If you build research into your practice then you will have a better idea of what a commissioner is looking for and you can then target those who will be a better fit. Artists can save a lot of time by throwing out the generic proposal and spending the time it would have taken doing mail shots researching a smaller number of potential commissioners who are interested in the work they create. Selection panels will know a bespoke proposal when they see it because it will address the guidelines they have published. Always remember that your proposal may be one of 50 that a panel will spend a day considering and you need to give yourself the best chance to be seen, understood and considered for the opportunity.

By Annette Clancy

Annette Clancy is an organisational consultant and psychotherapist with over 20 years experience working in and consulting to the cultural sector. Prior to establishing her consultation practice www.inter-actions.biz she was artistic director of Garter Lane Arts Centre in Waterford; worked with Dublin Theatre Festival and was administrator of the Soho Theatre Company (London). Annette is a graduate of Communications Studies, holds an MSc in Systemic Organisation and Management and is currently a Doctoral Candidate at the Management School at the University of Bath (UK)

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- › Visual Artists Cafe
- › ***News***
 - › ***News Northern Ireland***
 - › ***VAI News***
 - › ***VAI News Northern Ireland***
- › What's On – Calendar View
- › Exhibitions and Events
 - › About
 - › Connaught
 - › Connaught – Galway
 - › Leinster
 - › Leinster – Dublin
 - › Munster
 - › Munster – Cork
 - › Munster – Limerick
 - › Northern Ireland
 - › Northern Ireland – Belfast
 - › Rest of Ulster
 - › International
 - › Online Exhibitions
- › Jobs and Opps
 - › About
 - › Commissions
 - › Competitions
 - › Conferences/Lectures/Talks/Screenings
 - › Courses/Workshops/Training
 - › For Sale / Wanted / Other
 - › Funding / Awards / Bursaries
 - › Internships, Placements and Volunteering
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