Andrew Olsen:

Hey everyone, this is Andrew Olsen with Rainmaker Fundraising Podcast. I'm here today with my friend, Coral Dill, who's the Principal at Grant Writers Etc, where she provides an array of services to help nonprofits build relationships with corporations, with foundations and even with the federal government. Coral, welcome to the show today.

Coral Dill:

Thank you for having me.

Andrew Olsen:

Hey, it's great to have you here. I do also want to say Coral is a chapter author in my most recent book, 101 Biggest Mistakes Nonprofits Make and How You Can Avoid Them. And I'm really excited because we're going to spend a good part of the conversation today talking about some of those mistakes that people make, particularly in the area of grants and some of your recommendations around those. Before we do that, take a few more minutes to tell us a little bit about yourself and a little bit about your firm.

Coral Dill:

Yeah. So Grant Writer, Etc was started about three, almost four years ago actually. I was working inhouse as a grant writer and was leaving to have my first child and it grew out of that. Since then we've been working with nonprofits in the Cincinnati area, but throughout the United States and Canada, and we've written grants throughout North America and Europe, so it's been a really great experience launching the business and then watching it grow. It's been really fun.

Andrew Olsen:

Awesome. Let's jump into this then. When it comes to grant writing and seeking grant support, you wrote a lot of great content in the book around this and I'd love for you to talk a little bit about what you see as the biggest mistake that an organization makes related to grant funding.

Coral Dill:

Absolutely. I think the number one mistake that I see is actually looking for grant funding in general, just prematurely. A lot of organizations, they'll get their 501(c)(3), or even sometimes before that as they're filling out the application, and they just cast all of their dreams on this grant funding, and it's just the assumption that, "Well, we'll just fund our whole mission with grants." I think that's just a misconception.

Coral Dill:

I talk a lot about that in the book, but really that's the last place you want to start. A lot of grant makers really want to see three years of solid outcomes and funding history, and they want to know that other people are invested in this mission, too. I think that's the largest mistake that I see in early days of nonprofits looking to fund their whole mission with grants.

Andrew Olsen:

Grants area is not something that I've ever really played in. I've always focused on individual relationship fundraising, so it's a really foreign space to me and I'm confused as to why an organization would say out the gate, "We're going to go and target grants," rather than saying, "Let's build up a community of supporters or target this or that.". What is it about the grant space that makes so many organizations try to go there first?

Coral Dill:

Yeah. Oh, I think people see it as a really fast way to get money in the door. You can get large sums of money seemingly quite easily and that's not true. I think the organizations that we see getting those $100,000 grant, $50,000 grants, they have really established a foundation, so they've got solid programs, solid outcomes. They have buy-in from community members and they have proven outcomes, so they can show that they're moving the needle, and a lot of new nonprofits, and by new, I mean also early stages, so you could be a few years old but just not have gained some traction. They don't necessarily see the work that has gone in for years before those organizations are applying for funding. So a small organization, $50,000 can be a huge amount of support. An individual donor may take a long time to cultivate, and then you're going to maybe get $5,000 grant, or $1,000 gift or grant. One grant application and you can get $50,000, $100,000, so a lot of people just see it as an easy way to get quick money. It's really not.

Andrew Olsen:

Gotcha. Okay. That makes a lot of sense. Something else you talked about in the book that I want to get an additional perspective on is related to expanding the number of grant funders in an organization's portfolio.

Andrew Olsen:

I'll tell you, when I come in and I'm doing an overall development audit or I'm having a conversation with an organization, I often hear some variance of, "Well, we want to get more grants this year so we're going to send out 500 letters of inquiry. We're going to send it to every grant-making organization in the state or all the big funders in the country," or something like that, which sounds to me like the grant-funding equivalent of, "We're going to go see if we can get Bill Gates or Oprah to give to us." But it happens all the time. Talk to me a little bit about the thought process behind that, why it doesn't make sense. Maybe is there a scenario where it does make sense? Give us a little context around that.

Coral Dill:

Yeah, for sure. In my opinion, it's never going to make sense to just throw everything against the wall and see what sticks. Grant writing, I don't work with individual donors, but I imagine it's quite similar. It's all about that relationship piece, so you cannot just send out a million applications that are not tailored, that are not submitted on the foundation of a relationship that has been built and expect for some return. You might get lucky. You might get one or two. There's always chances, but the likelihood of that being a strong contingent of your funding is unlikely.

Coral Dill:

I would say an organization sending out 12, 24, whatever, 20 applications a year that are really strategic, that have really been focused for like-minded foundations or grantmakers, you're going to see a far higher rate of success with those than if you just blast out 200 applications cold. You're not going to see a return on that.

Andrew Olsen:

As you've been talking, it triggered something for me, and maybe this is an inappropriate perspective on my part, maybe I'm callous about it, but I feel like part of this issue is... I don't know, do you see this as much as I feel like I see it, this issue of people sent blasting out requests?

Coral Dill:

Yeah. Actually a client that I was working with last year, they had never had a grant writer before, so I was asking... They had grants written and so I was like, "Well, if you've never had a grant writer, how do you have content already written?" And they said that they got all the parents together of this particular group and they just all wrote random grants and submitted them all. Obviously, none of them were funded. But I was like, "What are you doing? What are you doing?"

Coral Dill:

So yeah, definitely, I've seen it. It's not something that I see often, but I think people just aren't realizing that there is so much more than, basically, a cold ask.

Andrew Olsen:

Yeah. In my mind, part of this comes down to the idea of, at least we're doing activity, right? We're not necessarily making progress, but we're creating activity, so we feel like we're busy and we're moving towards a goal even though the consequence might be that we don't actually move forward. Is that part of it or am I just being callous?

Coral Dill:

Yeah, I think you look at teams that are answering to whomever it is: a development director, a board of directors, constituents. And you need to answer on like, "What are you doing to raise funds?" "We just submitted 200 grant applications." "You could have submitted none and you would have had the same luck, so let's be strategic."

Coral Dill:

So yeah, there is some of that. It's just spinning your wheels so you feel like you're busy but you're not actually, and some of it just honestly comes from a lack of education around grants, and this lack of understanding of what grants entail. It is not just a cold ask and you don't really get... Again, there's an exception to every rule, but you're not going to get... Like in sales, you're not going to get a lot from cold calls. You're going to get more from more leans. And the same is true of grants. The more you put in, the more you're going to probably get out.

Andrew Olsen:

Let's talk about that piece for a second. If it's true that the more you put in, the more you'll get out, and that it's about relationships, talk us through... How would you coach a client who came to you and said, "We want to increase our grant funding. How do we target the appropriate potential funders? What's the process?" Talk a little bit about that if you can.

Coral Dill:

For sure. First of all, it's going to start with comprehensive research. You want to identify all of the grantmakers who share your funding priorities. In the book, I talk a little bit about a client who... We were looking for a van and they were like, "Great. The Ford Foundation." That's great, but not great, because the Ford Foundation does not have a funding priority of transportation. So really identifying those key funders.

Coral Dill:

I think a lot of people will get anxious when they realize, "There are only three local funders who are interested in our mission." "But so? Let's cultivate those three local funders. Maybe your mission is crazy, way out there, but three people are super-passionate about that. Those three people can be your cheerleaders and they might have connections to grant makers in other states or even other countries."

Coral Dill:

I think it's starting with that research piece, finding people who are passionate about the same things that your organization is passionate about, and then working to cultivate those. Does that answer a little part of your questioning?

Andrew Olsen:

So let's talk a little bit now about revenue expectations. I see this all the time on the major gift side of the house where you might look at a portfolio of donors and say, "Wow. These donors could collectively give us $1 billion." Then someone, somewhere goes in and writes something like that into a development plan, right? Does the same thing happen in the world of grants? Talk a little bit about mistakes that people make around expectations on revenue.

Coral Dill:

Oh, my goodness. All the time. I talk about this actually a little bit in the book, too, about this idea that, collectively, these foundations that we've identified that have no interest in our mission, by the way, have $100 million that they can give us, so we're confident that we get a million of it. Well, you've never had a grant before, so probably not, but there is just this notion, and like we were talking about, just quick, easy money.

Coral Dill:

There's this idea that, "We don't have to waste time with anything under six figures at best. We're just going to start with $100,000 or $500,000 grants," and it's like, "No, that just doesn't happen."

Coral Dill:

Again, exceptions to every rule, but in general, again, you're going to want to diversify your portfolio and you're probably going to have a variety of small grants, medium-sized grants, what have you, but the likelihood of you going out and just writing a couple of grants for $500,000 or $100,000, it's probably not going to happen.

Coral Dill:

Some organizations that I work with, obviously, do have a number of six-figure grants and that's fantastic, but for smaller organizations, that's definitely not something you should be going and telling your board that you're just going to write a couple of grants for $100,000 each.

Andrew Olsen:

And those six figure grants, they probably aren't the first grants those organizations have written for, right?

Coral Dill:

Correct. And that's a thing. Unless there's a really unique situation with seed funding or something like that, your first grant is likely going to be substantially smaller. And by substantially, I mean maybe 50 or 25, maybe 5,000. Again, it depends on the scope of the organization and what kind of foundation you found. But yes, realities need to be maintained.

Andrew Olsen:

You mentioned the importance of relationship. I understand relationship from the individual donor side of the house, and I think these are probably more similar than people realize. I've interacted with some grant writers inside organizations who, surprisingly, never leave their desk, right? They are focused on doing research and writing grant requests and all the followup paperwork that has to be taken into account.

Andrew Olsen:

What I've been surprised by is, when we have a prospect-management conversation, no one says, "Oh, I'm going to meet with so-and-so at this foundation," right there. There's rarely the kind of investment in relationship that you get on the other side of the house. I suspect that's a mistake, but talk to us. Maybe this is a uniqueness of the grant-funding space.

Coral Dill:

Yeah, I think it is a little bit of both. The hard part, from what I've heard, and I've only been writing grants for the last, I want to say, eight years, eight or 10 years, so I'm relatively still new to the grant space and I don't know... I've heard that this used to be different. I don't know to what extent.

Coral Dill:

I think it's challenging. Relationship is a huge piece of it, especially with the advent of web portals and applications. It's very cold. And it's very easy to send out a lot of applications and have no personal interaction because you have the instructions there and you just submit your application. The smaller foundations you need to call. Often, at least in Cincinnati, you're calling a law office or you're speaking to an administrator of the trust. It can be hard as a grant writer to be motivated enough to make those personal connections because it's so easy to not.

Coral Dill:

Is it beneficial? Absolutely. And should an in-house grant writer be leaving their desk to meet with these foundations? Absolutely.

Coral Dill:

One challenge that I have seen is, on a foundation or a grant maker's side, it's hard to understand or gauge how they want that relationship to be built because to know a foundation is to know one foundation. They're all different.

Coral Dill:

There are foundations here locally where they only want to communicate via email. That's not ideal for my clients because we want them to come out, we want them to see what we're doing, we want them to see the space, our programs, et cetera. But that's just what they want. Other ones will want you to come in for a sit-down or they'll want to come visit or they'll want to grab lunch and they'll want to talk about what you're doing. It really is about following the foundation's lead, but being open to building that relationship when appropriate. Does that answer that question?

Andrew Olsen:

It does. A follow up on this, just more on the relational side, obviously, there are reports and things that have to be completed after a grant is distributed to make sure that you're using the funds correctly and whatever the particular grant maker's requirements are. What do you advise your clients as far as complete that step, yes, but is there room for additional stewardship or again, is that one of those things where the grant maker sets the guidelines there, as well?

Coral Dill:

Yeah, as a contracted grant writer, I play a unique role because I'm shepherding them through the process while not actually doing the process myself. I really want to be in the background and not participate in the relationship-building. A lot of foundations will have an 18 or 24-month waiting period, so once that report is in, you have usually another year before you can ask for money again. A lot of people just tend to let that go cold and they have other grants and process that they're working on and worrying about.

Coral Dill:

The best advice I ever received from a grant maker was, "If there are any changes in your organizations, good, bad, indifferent, whatever, I do not want to read it in the newspaper or hear it on the news. I want to be the first to know." I think that's really important, even in that down period, you've submitted your report, you can't apply for money, realizing that relationship needs to be stewarded that whole time. If you have any victory than that... The whole time you have the grant, but, specifically, in that lull period where that grant maker might not be on your radar, engage them, invite them out, send them just a quick email and make sure they're getting your newsletter, things like that. Make sure that you are their direct point of contact and they are not hearing third-party about your organization. I think that goes the distance to keep them engaged, but also have them out.

Coral Dill:

Again, extend that invitation and also show them you're not just interested in the money, you're interested in the partnership because, truly, grants are a partnership. You are trying to reach shared goals. How can we do that even when we are not in an active funding partnership at that moment? How can we still engage?

Andrew Olsen:

I love that. Okay, thank you. So last question on these mistakes, and then I want to shift us into a different conversation, but are there any unique potential mistakes that organizations make with respect to seeking federal grant support?

Coral Dill:

Oh goodness. Federal grants are their own unique beast. My wheel house is really foundation grants. I obviously, not obviously, but I have done foundation grants. State level funding? There is an incredible amount of work and documents you have, attachments A through Z. Everything is very specific. I think, gosh, there are a lot of mistakes that organizations make.

Coral Dill:

Potentially, I would say what I've seen the most would be a lack of capacity to handle the grant itself. Organizations may see it as a large influx of cash, but not realize that they do not have the bandwidth or the capabilities to carry out that grant as needed, right from implementation to reporting, it can require a lot. I would say that that is probably the biggest mistake that I see, but there's just so much that goes into a federal grant.

Andrew Olsen:

When you're saying that they make a mistake around handling the grant, you're not saying writing the application, you're saying it's everything after that, right?

Coral Dill:

Yeah. You have to just be really aware of the stipulations that are coming with that grant. There are a lot of expectations, and I think you do not want to get yourself in a place where you've mismanaged your grant. There was, this was not a client, but a local district, received a federal grant and the grant was mismanaged. Of course, they're not going to get a federal grant again, but also their local foundations saw that they mismanaged that grant so they're just falling out of favor with them, as well. You need to make sure that you have the bandwidth to manage that grant. The applications are their own beast, but to also manage the grant itself, it can be sticky if you're not ready.

Andrew Olsen:

Okay. That's really good intel. All right. Let's talk a little bit about something different. We're recording this on April 27th, 2020. As far as I know, your state's still in some semblance of a lockdown. My state's still in some semblance of a lockdown, and most other states across the country are. I'm assuming that your phone six weeks ago started ringing the same way mine did with clients saying, "What's going to happen? What do we know? How do we project from here? Are the grant's going to come in, are they not going to come in?" What are you telling clients right now? What's that conversation like?

Coral Dill:

First, calm down. Take a breath. And then I'm telling them to be consistent. I think there's this knee-jerk reaction where things are tight. We're not sure what is going to happen. We don't really know what's happening now. Let's just stop.

Coral Dill:

With a lot of people going home, some of my clients cannot do work from home, so some of them have had to lay off staff and whatnot. There's this thought of like, "Okay, for some clients..." It's that fight, flight or freeze. Some are freezing. They don't know what to do. Some are working over time and then some, they're just lost.

Coral Dill:

I'm telling them to just be consistent on the fundraising side of things. With grants, grants aren't changing. They're changing but they're still here, so be consistent. If you had something on your schedule to apply for, unless you have heard from the foundation otherwise, apply. If you have applications pending, unless you've heard from the grant funder otherwise, they're still pending. Be prepared for anything that you would expect, really. I had an email just yesterday. Site visits are still happening. They're happening via Zoom, but they're still happening, so be prepared.

Andrew Olsen:

That's great. I was going to ask you that because I've heard from one other client who said, "Well, we can't do site visits at all right now," so that's interesting that you have some clients and some organizations doing that over Zoom.

Coral Dill:

Yeah, this one grant funder, they want to meet with the executive director, the development director and the program director all on Zoom. They would like a tour if one of them could be at the facility, and they're just going to go through everything that you would typically go through in person, they will go through it on Zoom, so it's things like that. Be consistent. Don't give into that fear and shutdown or run away, but be consistent. That was my first piece of advice that I would begin continuing to give clients.

Andrew Olsen:

Are you counseling clients to try to seek new grant funding at this time, as well?

Coral Dill:

Yeah, I'm counseling them to be agile. There are grants that existed pre-COVID-19 that still exist. Some of them have shifted their priorities, so be agile. We're all shifting, but how can you make those funds work for you?

Coral Dill:

I think a lot of people are in this realm of like, "Well, we can't do programs from home or we can't do programs online." Okay, but what can we do? If it's 18 months, we can't just shut down for 18 months, so how can we be agile and meet the needs of our clients or consumers, and also continue to strive to meet those goals and those shared goals between us and the grant maker? Because there is space. There's still that space that grant makers... They're real people. They're living this with us and so they're realizing we can't achieve those same outcomes, maybe, or the goals have to change, but we're in this together, so how can we make that work? So just to be agile, if that makes sense.

Andrew Olsen:

Yeah, that does make a lot of sense. Are you seeing or hearing anything different with corporate foundations versus other types of foundations? Any difference in posture right now?

Coral Dill:

Not that I have experienced. I think across the board everybody is shifting slightly to see if they can make COVID-19 funding a priority, probably more actually on the corporate side than the foundation side. It has not impacted my clients mostly because I'm working with private trusts and foundations rather than corporate.

Coral Dill:

I will say I have some state funding pending through a local administrator and that has been interesting to watch because, rather than shifting their priorities, they actually came back to us and asked us if we wanted to receive the funds that we had been awarded. We were awarded funds two weeks ago, three weeks ago, and they came back at the end of last week and asked us if we even still wanted the funding because it required a 25% match, so that was really interesting to me because there is going to be a contingent of organizations who can no longer meet that match, so-

Andrew Olsen:

Sure. Sure. That makes good sense. I'm curious to know, for your business itself and the services that you're providing to your clients in the community, what has changed for you in the way that you serve organizations because of this?

Coral Dill:

Yeah. I'm still grant writing probably as much as ever, if not maybe more, because I'm doing the regular programming funding requests and also the COVID relief requests. Then, like I was saying earlier, a large part of making sure that organizations are fully funded is making sure that that research part is up to par. For current funding, new research needs to be done with COVID-19 relief funding just to make sure everybody knows where those dollars are and what they can be applied to. Then also at the end of this, we're still going to need all that program funding, so how can we create a strategy now that carries us through this time, but once all of this, hopefully, is over, so research is a big aspect of what I'm really providing for existing clients, but then also new clients just so they can create that strategy and really hit the ground hard with regular programming once COVID-19 is, hopefully, in the background one day.

Coral Dill:

Then another thing that we're launching that we're super-excited about is our grants readiness audit. It's for existing clients, it's for existing grant seekers, it's for new grant seekers, and it's just putting your organization and its grant readiness under a microscope and assessing everything from your financials to your programs, to your outcomes to what funding is available for you, and making sure that we're going through that with a fine-tooth comb and ensuring you aren't going to end up in a position like we were talking about with a federal funding, or you just don't have the bandwidth and capacity to provide the services that you're committing to, or spend the dollars in a way that you need to in order to get these programs off the ground and managed appropriately. We really look at all of that and we're really excited because a lot of organizations, I think, can benefit from that look inward to see how can they become more effective.

Andrew Olsen:

Yeah. No, I think that could be a really useful tool. I see this all the time, you probably, too, but in this space there's such a... Lost the word... Such a move to like, "Let's just act before we have all the information," right? "We get an idea, we move on it, even if it's maybe not a good idea," right?

Coral Dill:

Right.

Andrew Olsen:

But either out of desperation or out of just lack of knowledge or who knows what, there's this motivation to move even when we haven't fully thought something out, so I feel like an audit product like this can be really beneficial. It might tell an organization a story they don't want to hear.

Coral Dill:

Oh yeah.

Andrew Olsen:

But I assume that the result isn't, you go through the audit, you're not ready, therefore, do nothing. It's "fix these four things and then be ready." Is that correct?

Coral Dill:

Exactly. That's a thing, the whole point of the audit, if you're not ready, yeah, let's uncover that, but then the next step is, okay, let's get ready, and then you have actionable steps once this grant audit is complete that you can... Maybe it's just working on your outcomes. Maybe it's something, I dare say as simple, as tightening up your mission.

Coral Dill:

I have worked with really baby organizations who do not have a solid mission statement. It could be as simple as that, but it could be greater things like, "Is your budget way off the rails and you've been in the red for the last five years? That's not going to look good to a grant maker, so how do we work through some of those things?"

Coral Dill:

So, yeah, it really looks at the full scope of everything that you would need to be grant ready and grant successful.

Andrew Olsen:

Okay. And so, admittedly ignorant to the process, it sounds, though, like once an organization goes through this process, they have the toolkit, if you will, ready to go that should, hopefully, make grant seeking a potentially faster, potentially easier process than if they were trying to create it all from scratch on the front end. Is that true?

Coral Dill:

Absolutely. Absolutely. In addition to working with nonprofits on the narrative piece of it to make sure that their narrative is strong, we're also making sure that all of their content is in one place so they're not going to... A lot of grants will require documents after documents after documents. We're going to make sure that that's all cohesive, in one place and solid, so you will have to tailor, obviously, each application to the relationship with that grantmaker or the requirements of that grantmaker. But, in general, your information going into those grant applications will be solid and everybody's going to benefit from that.

Andrew Olsen:

Awesome. Is there an organization or a type of organization that's ideally suited for a service like this? Is it equally applicable to everyone? What's the sweet spot for that kind of service?

Coral Dill:

Yeah. I think it's equally applicable to anybody who is confident enough to take a good hard look at themselves, which there are a lot of organizations who are not going to be comfortable doing that because it takes a lot of self-awareness.

Andrew Olsen:

Definitely shortens the list, yes.

Coral Dill:

Yeah. I can create a bit of discomfort, but the thing is, it's iron sharpens iron. Yes, it's going to be messy and we're going to get in the thick of things, but at the end of it, you're going to come out better than you were. And that's a good thing.

Coral Dill:

This is particularly going to be good for people who have not been successful winning grants. Perhaps they've applied and they can't seem to get their grant seeking off the ground. People who have not been as successful as they have anticipated or thought, we can look at why. Maybe it's just a couple tweaks here and there. Oftentimes, it's budget and outcomes that organizations go off the rails with, so let's look at those.

Coral Dill:

If you are new to grant seeking and just don't even know where to start, this might be a way for me to guide you through and shepherd you through that process, right from application to recording. We can look at what you have to offer and where you need to get to be really grants-ready, so there's something for every level of maturity of an organization, if that makes sense.

Andrew Olsen:

That makes a lot of sense. Yeah, totally. All right. I think we're just about out of time. I do want to just get one last question with you around the overall of the grants process and what's going on right now.

Andrew Olsen:

I know that you said you'd counseled your clients don't panic, or calm down, and stay the course, but an organization that is newly seeking to enter the space right now in the midst of crisis and chaos, if you will, with calm down and stay the course as givens, is there any other different counsel that you give an organization in that space right now than you would any other time?

Coral Dill:

I would give this advice anytime, but probably more so now, is just be honest. It's okay to be vulnerable with funders. A lot of people think of grantmakers as this mysterious entity that they hold the power because they hold the money, but they're real people. We are navigating life with... I have a nine month old and a three year old in tow while I'm doing my work. These grant makers are doing that, too, with their kids, with their aging parents. We are all in this together, and so if we have to apply for a grant and we can't promise our outcomes because, quite frankly we don't know what they're going to be, that's okay. It's okay to acknowledge what we don't know because we are not in this process in a vacuum. We are all going through it together, and so that element of vulnerability, I think now more than ever, specifically for nonprofits who are new to the grant seeking process, I would say embrace that vulnerability and it's okay. Don't be fearful.

Andrew Olsen:

That's good. Thank you. Coral, thank you so much for being here. Thanks for sharing your insights with us. If someone wants to talk to you about one of those grant audits or engaging you in another way, what's the best way for people to reach you?

Coral Dill:

Feel free on LinkedIn at Coral Dill or on my website at grantwriteretc.com or shoot me an email at coral@grantwriteretc.com.

Andrew Olsen:

Awesome. Thanks again for being here today. Really appreciate you.

Coral Dill:

Thanks so much, Andrew.