Top 5 Lessons I Learned As A Grant Reviewer for Komen

By Jamie Wells, M.D. — March 26, 2018

I had the distinct pleasure of being a reviewer for the 2018-2019 Community Grants program for Komen this Fall. The experience gave me a fresh perspective on the process and affirmed the organization’s dedication to getting it right with respect to women’s health, optimizing breast cancer understanding as well as facilitating early diagnosis, screening, monitoring and treatment. Fulfilling a core commitment to reducing barriers and expanding access, especially for those most challenged and underserved, this funding is particularly important to curtail late stage diagnosis which can adversely impact survival.(1)

Here are some pearls of wisdom I can now pass along.

**Top 5 Lessons To Heed When Writing Grants**

**Substance Over Surface Matters, So Don’t Fret The Big League**

With healthcare’s consistent and relentless consolidation, regional centers are becoming behemoths (See *The Steady Demise of Pediatrics* [3] to understand this trend). For a smaller scale local organization with a refined niche, the notion of competing for grants with institutions that have centralized divisions devoted exclusively to grant-writing might seem daunting and like an uphill battle. But, don’t be discouraged! The grant review committee reflects a diverse team whose professional and personal exposures individually and as a group value separating the wheat from
the chaff. Their varying expertise allows for genuine unpacking of the fluffy, more persuasive prose. Data and results speak for themselves. And, while there is an indispensable role for the formidable academic tertiary care center, there is also a vital need for the focused, lean and neighborhood advocacy leadership to fill in the gaps such facilities inevitably create.

**Past Performance And Tangible Metrics**

Now that I have been a Komen grant reviewer and a judge for the world championships of Dean Kamen’s robotics competition (see [here](#)) and Miss America’s Outstanding Teen scholarship competition (see [here](#)), I am surprised to learn that the winning traits that resonate the most in these endeavors reflect quite a few similarities. Talk about all the things you want to do without any tangible demonstration of action falls short. Talk is cheap, as “they” say. This does not knock out a nascent organization per se, but it conveys especially in this realm that you must earn your grant by showing good faith tangible efforts and a system of measuring gains and losses that has checks and balances for ideal course correction. If there is a record of past performance, then showcasing growth and identifying missteps, lessons learned and how to improve for the future will serve you well in presenting yourself as a thoughtful candidate with a seriousness of purpose.

**Don’t Skip The Basics**

There is a lot of emotion and passion in the realm of cancer treatment and prevention. All of the grants reviewed demonstrated a sincere desire to impact outcomes and help those in greatest need. Being exuberant about your organization’s platform is wonderful and, hopefully, a given. But, don’t let that zeal compel you to glaze over and overlook completing the most basic requirements included in the instructions for submitting your grant. Those are typically part of the equation given that the funding organization has its own requirements to maintain its nonprofit status. Remember, you don’t want an inability to avoid easily controllable deductions to guide consideration of whether or not you receive a grant. So, always answer the questions asked. Don’t preoccupy yourself with who else is competing with you, instead position yourself to exhibit your own strengths while being proactive about improving your weaknesses. Don’t forget, grant reviewers read many submissions, so stand out for your work and its excellence and not for being a disorganized, difficult read.

**Solve A Problem, Don’t Create A Solution To a Problem That Doesn’t Exist**

Do your research - detail your knowledge about the issue you wish to tackle while showing you are fully informed about the most updated mission of the organization from whom you are requesting the grant. Display your understanding of the practical concerns over current trends and problems in access to healthcare. Concisely and explicitly address what you think is crucial to achieving their mission and why, along with how you are uniquely positioned to be able to solve it the best way.

**Always Consider Who Might Be On The Committee**

Know your audience! The grant review committees cover a vast array of disciplines and backgrounds that often overlap to approach the topic at hand from innumerable directions. I was most impressed by the diversity of participants who covered all aspects of healthcare, including but not limited to those from hospital and public health administration, governmental, legislative and legal experts to research scientists, frontline medical staff and patient advocates. Collectively,
it is this multi-disciplinary network that is perfectly suited for the job. This individual and composite perspective was incredibly well-suited to stratify the greatest needs of the communities involved. I was proud to be a part of it and found each member duty bound to guarantee the funds be directed responsibly, meaningfully and where they can do the most good.

**Note(s):**

(1) With Ambassador Nancy Brinker [1], founder of Susan G Komen (named for her sister), who is considered a trailblazer and global leader in the breast cancer movement.
The experience was very rewarding and I was impressed by the consummate professionalism, hard work and fidelity to the cause I witnessed by the Susan G. Komen Philadelphia branch. At the
helm is Komen Philly’s CEO Elaine Grobman (picture here with me) who is a tireless advocate for those battling breast cancer. She is relentless in her drive to arm all women with the tools to guarantee they receive the highest quality care, best outcome imaginable and earliest detection possible. It is abundantly clear she will not stop until the disease is eradicated.
Known for their race for the cure efforts among other fundraising events of community engagement, I had the privilege to attend "Strength and Survival" which is a multicultural,
multigenerational breast-health empowerment event & musical celebration with the Philly POPS Orchestra at the Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts. It was an incredibly moving experience that gave a powerful voice to those living with or after a diagnosis of breast cancer, their doctors and surgeons as well as family members. The impact of this disease on many generations and members of a family was quite striking.

Here I am featured with Dr. Arnold Baskies -Immediate Past Chair of American Cancer Society’s Board of Directors (& a surgical oncologist).