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When you first set out to secure independent grant support, you'll probably find yourself on a long and winding road. If you haven't completed the preliminary research needed to apply for government funding, you will be left with corporate, private and independent foundations. In the United States, these organizations range in assets from less than US\$1 million to billions of dollars, and they are obligated to spend 4.25–5% of their worth annually.

Understandably, early-career researchers gripe about the amount of time that they must spend writing grant proposals instead of actually getting their research done. It's a slog, but taking some roads less travelled might shorten your grant-seeking journey. Yes, you can and should turn to the customary foundation-database searches. But a much less common, yet promising, route is to examine annual reports from organizations in your area of research, because they often name their grant givers.

You should also consider asking the foundations that support your work (or did so in the past) whether they can recommend other funders. It makes sense, as well, to dig through the records in your institution's development office to see which grantmakers have supported work in your field in the past. Personal connections are always valuable — indeed, can be highly valuable — so you should ask around.

The most common searches for funding happen at directory websites that hold databases that list grantmakers. If you get into one of these, you should do a deep dive before deciding whether it is useful for you, because each has its own idiosyncrasies.

Take, for example, a major US database that increasingly includes European foundations, too: the paid-subscriber service Foundation Directory Online (register here for limited free access: fdo.foundationcenter.org). Say you're an ornithologist researching an endangered species. When you type 'ornithology' into the keyword search field, you will find only four results. Type in 'birds', and you get none. Try 'bird' in the singular — and you will get a list of 22 funders (but only after you work out how to get around the much larger list that includes foundations with board members who are named Bird or addresses on Bird Street).

At the other extreme, entering 'wildlife' into the search field yields 793 results and 'biodiversity' produces 1,063 — and you can expect that many of those listed will be interested ▶

COLUMN

Quest for the holy grant

Looking for funding? Here's a smart guide for sources off the beaten track, says **Ingrid Eisenstadter**.

► in species protection. A search for a specific interest in 'endangered' yields 85 foundation names.

These disparate results appear because grant-giving foundations have to check off predetermined 'fields of interest' on a list created by foundation-directory staff: on that list, 'birds' is not an option, but 'bird preservation' is. The search for 'wildlife' yields results for both 'wildlife biodiversity' and 'wildlife sanctuaries', among others in this category. As a result, the most effective searches here (and in other databases) will include specific keywords as well as broad categories, so you need to cast a wide net and do both.

For the same reason, if your research project is hyper-local — for example, a tree study in New York City's Central Park — you will, of course, search foundations in New York City for a match. Bear in mind, however, that foundations far from your location may have roots that lead back home, and they might continue to give there. If the database that you are using does not give you an option to search a grantmaker's geographic areas of interest, do a national keyword search using the name of your home base. You should also do an index search for keywords such as 'park', 'forests', 'urban' and similar terms, and see whether you can interest them in your locality.

For a summary of the services available at some of the largest databases, see go.nature.com/28ptrvp. Monthly or annual access fees are usually required at grant-giver databases.

DIG FOR DONORS

If your project overlaps with the research interests of non-governmental organizations, it makes sense to look at copies of their annual reports, because they will usually publish the names of their donors on a yearly basis. At minimum, you will probably find on those websites their current annual reports, and if more than one year is available for viewing, check archived back issues as well. For the same reason, if you know of a university with an active research department in your field, see whether they have a newsletter and, if so, sign up. It is not particularly in the interest of these institutions to publish their donors' names, precisely because it gives other researchers the opportunity to go shopping there — but these acknowledgements are customary and are a way of publicly thanking their supporters.

As long as you are reading these reports, keep a lookout for individual donors who are listed as making substantial grants in your area. This is more of a long shot, but get online and see whether they have publicly listed contact information.

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Journal articles in your field also often end with acknowledgements of those who have supported the author's research. Take note of who these funders are, and check out their websites to see whether there are any opportunities for you. Do they do any giving in your home country? Is the size of their grants meaningful for your work? The same is true for related research that is covered in the popular press. Track your way back to the website of the organization whose work was covered and look for acknowledgements of supporters.

It also makes sense to contact the grant givers who support you now or who have done in the past and ask them whether they can provide introductions to, or suggestions about, other funders.

Such requests are infrequent, but you should not assume that your enquiry would be unwelcome — they have already demonstrated interest in your field.

THE SOLICITATION GAME

Many foundations disburse their funds only to preselected researchers or organizations that they invite to submit proposals. Some databases don't list these grant givers; others do. Those that do will usually indicate that funders "do not accept unsolicited proposals", as their own websites will confirm. If you look, for example, at the 1,063 organizations at the Foundation Directory Online that respond to the keyword search 'biodiversity', you will see that only 390 accept unsolicited proposals; for the 'wildlife' search, only 309 of 703 do so. It is understandable that small foundations make this choice: they do not have the staff to handle a high volume of requests, and there is indeed a case for spending their limited resources on their missions, rather than on more staff time.

That said, some of the largest foundations in the United States do not accept unsolicited proposals. Bloomberg Philanthropies, with a \$5.4-billion bankroll, and the Helmsley Charitable Trust, with \$4.2 billion, both based in New York City, are among them. The Bloomberg website does, however, state that "while we currently do not accept unsolicited grant proposals, we are always open to new ideas from new sources", and at 'Contact Us', you can at least submit a note.

The Helmsley foundation site, by contrast, notes that "unsolicited grant inquiries will not be reviewed or considered." Clearly, the hundreds of large foundations that have such

policies cannot hope to find their way to all the innovative ideas in their areas of interest, much less the high-risk and high-reward, flash-of-insight ideas, precisely because these projects will be underfunded or unfunded, and therefore unpublished — and not yet accessible for perusal.

If one of these 'no-unsolicited-proposals' foundations looks too good to pass up, however, you have nothing to lose by sending a polite, brief letter to explain your work. You might get lucky. It happens.

Indeed, such unwelcome enquiries to these foundations are common. They are mostly ignored, but given their huge numbers, it's worth a try. Let common sense prevail: keep the letter brief and nail your explanation of your work. Do not open your letter with, "I know you don't accept unsolicited proposals, but ..." or "I understand you fund diabetes research and ..." They already know that. Don't waste the space. Go straight to the urgency of your work, its lasting benefits and why you cannot hope for funding from other sources.

Explain why you are remarkably qualified to carry out your project, and keep it short. Keep technical vocabulary out as much as possible to accommodate readers who are not scientists or, in this case, who may be support staff with instructions about what to pass on to management and what to toss. Some researchers have succeeded in jumping this hurdle, and once your letter is written, you can send it to numerous unwelcoming foundations without devoting a great deal of time to personalizing each letter. Expect to send snail mail because e-mail addresses are often withheld on these websites.

In my many years of working for a grant-giving foundation, I have found that most individuals whom we have funded, along with the institutions where they work or study, do not return in subsequent years to look for a new grant. So, it may well make sense for you to take a look at your organization's or department's funding history; you can find this information in your institution's development or finance office. Whether your organization's speciality is macular degeneration, massless particles or protecting the wildlands of southern Utah, the foundations that funded your institution in the past will probably have the same interests today.

You should try to reconnect with them. Give it a shot, and good luck. ■

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