
CHAPTER 1

Introduction to Persuasive Proposal Writing

In today's competitive grants environment, "good" proposals seldom get funded; "excellent" proposals get funded. Excellent proposals *persuade* sponsors to open up their checkbooks to invest in you, your project, and your organization. To increase the competitiveness of your grant applications and chances for funding success, this book models a systematic process for identifying and incorporating persuasion throughout your proposals.

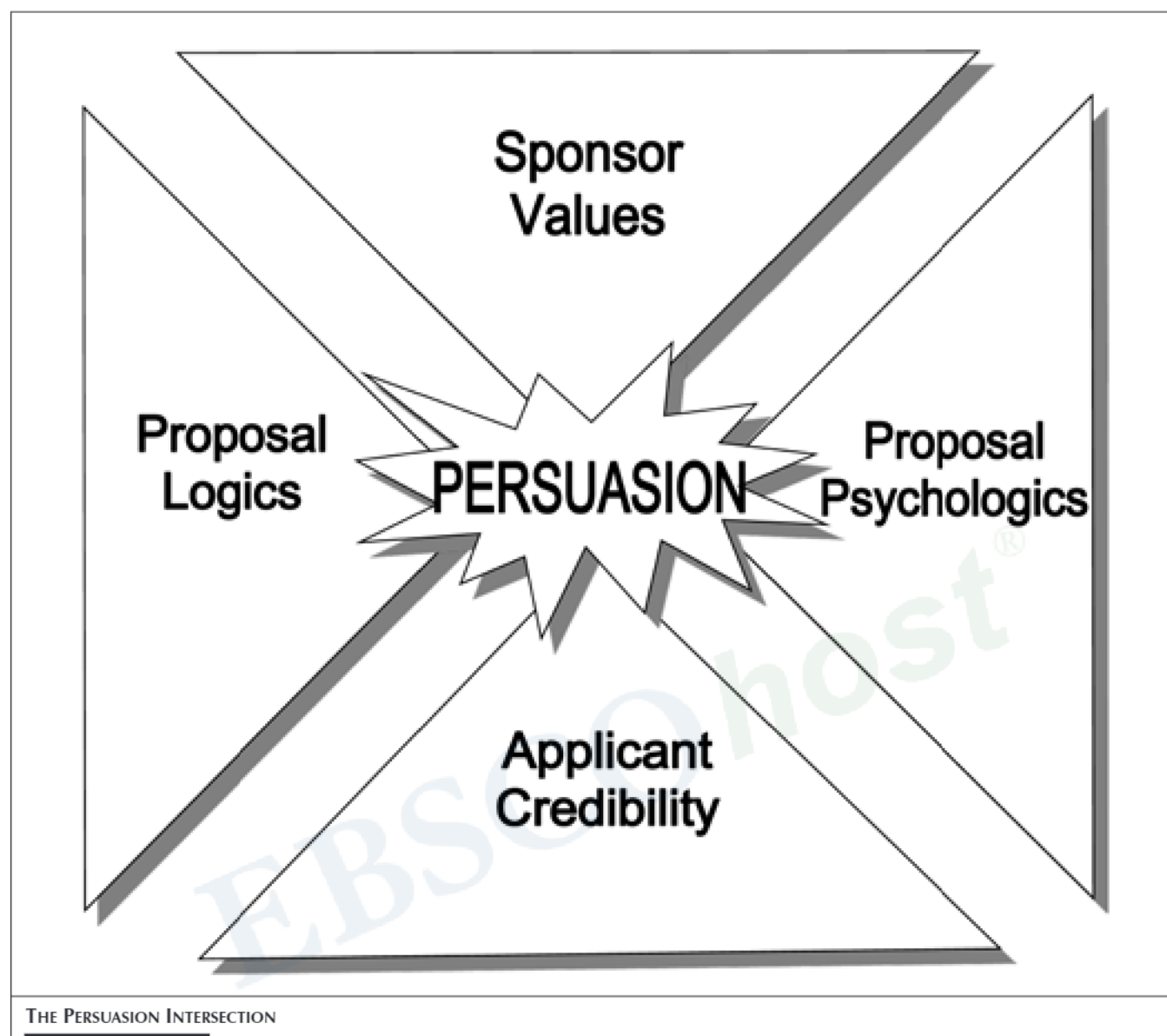
Inevitably, sponsors (grantmakers) receive more proposals than they can possibly fund. In a stack of applications, grant reviewers quickly discern between proposals that are responsive to Request for Proposal (RFP) guidelines and those that are not; nonresponsive proposals are rejected immediately. Good proposals provide information to demonstrate that they comply with *every* requirement in the RFP. Excellent proposals, however, stand out from the competition because they go beyond merely complying with the requirements of the RFP to satisfying the needs of the sponsor. Proposals are persuasive when they connect your project ideas to the values of the sponsor. Connecting with the values of the sponsor means that your proposal must present the right balance of logic, emotion, and relationships.

THE PERSUASION INTERSECTION

As a grantseeker, your job is to secure extramural funding for projects that are important to your organization. However, sponsors rarely award grant funding just because you support a specific cause or work for a specific organization. You must persuade them to invest in your projects and organization. Providing information about your project is a necessary but not sufficient condition to win grant funding; do not expect sponsors to immediately understand the value of your project. Information is not persuasion. Persuasion is the key to funding success. Persuasion occurs at the intersection of the sponsor's values, applicant credibility, proposal logics, and proposal psychologies. As illustrated in Fig. 1 and subsequently defined, these four elements make up the Persuasion Intersection.

Sponsor Values

Sponsors have a particular view of the world. They are vitally concerned about specific problems, injustices, or inequities. They are so concerned, in fact, that they are willing to commit their own money to address these problems. In essence, they see a gap between a current situation and an improved situation, between "what is" and "what ought to be." Their mission is to close this gap. The gap represents sponsor values, how they view problems of interest to them.

**FIGURE 1**

For instance, one private foundation concerned about preventing child abuse describes its values:

The Prevent Abuse Foundation is committed to ensuring a safe environment for children through support of primary prevention activities throughout the state, advocating support for children and families, as well as educating professionals and communities about the role of prevention in eliminating child abuse. Over the last 20 years, the Prevent Abuse Foundation has become a vital resource to communities across the state by supporting a variety of family support strategies, including parent education, home visitation, family resource centers and public awareness campaigns. The Prevent Abuse Foundation also provides grass roots, community-based groups with technical and professional assistance, sharing the best program practices and evaluation techniques.

Applicant Credibility

As the applicant, your job is to establish three types of credibility: organizational, individual, and project. You have a creditable organization proposing a creditable idea to be

directed by a creditable project director. Enhance your credibility by establishing your uniqueness. Differentiate yourself from your potential competition. What makes your organization stand out from others? What can your project director do better than anyone else? What makes your project innovative? Uniqueness is a strength when it relates to your exceptional ability to conduct the proposed project.

The following example illustrates how a university biology department seeking funding for genetics research describes itself:

The biology department at Major State University is uniquely suited to conduct this crucial genetics research. Stemming from the department's solid past of 30 years of doctoral studies in biological science, its faculty includes Drs. Kwasny, Lee, and Dilworth. This distinguished academic core cumulatively represents 117 years of productive research experience at our university. With a special focus on the molecular basis of oncogenesis, our current research uses unique systems to analyze the genetic and hormonal factors responsible for gene regulation. While these systems are not widely studied in established programs of cell biology, they are most suitable for answering the cutting-edge questions of gene expression and regulation—and our department is endowed with the intellectual talent to succeed.

Proposal Logics

Proposal logics include the *systematic* development of proposal components to show the relationship between an identified gap, an improved situation, and resulting benefits to the target population. Problems represent gaps between what exists today and what could exist tomorrow. Objectives are the specific, measurable activities that will help solve the problem. Benefits represent the good things that will occur by achieving the objectives. These elements must reflect a direct relationship between the proposed project and the values of the sponsor.

As an illustration, the RFP guidelines from one private foundation that supports medical, cultural, civic, and educational programs benefiting youth under the age of 18 indicate:

Please provide a concise description of the need or problem to be addressed. Include the overall goals and purpose of your organization or specific department concerned, the specific purpose of the funds, and how your objectives will be accomplished. Include a project timeline. Please summarize your target population in measurable terms. Indicate how your organization will evaluate the program.

Proposal Psychologics

Sponsors fund projects for psychological as well as for logical reasons. Proposal psychologics respond to the emotional needs of the sponsor. Successful proposals go beyond addressing the minimum performance standards outlined in the application materials; they also display intangible elements: trust, energy, passion, ownership, and commitment. Sponsors' emotions store the lessons of experience. They don't want to take a lot of risks with their money. Sponsors view grants as investments in an improved future. Thus, before they award funding, they need to feel comfortable with you, to trust that you understand their concerns and share their values.

In a proposal to a federal agency, a private college describes its lengthy history of success collaborating with community partners, directing national programs that serve the targeted minority population, and institutionalizing project activities:

For more than a decade project partners have collaborated on a variety of grant-related initiatives, including a six-year joint teacher education program between the College of Native Americans and Midwestern Regional College. The project director has led several successful national intervention projects for Native American middle school students, including Kids Math Camp, Achievement in Math, and Math and Science Immersion. Each one of these projects has been sustained beyond the conclusion of its granting period through the generosity of individual philanthropy and in-kind contributions from partner institutions.

Successful proposal writers understand the relationship between sponsor values and their own organizational capabilities and between proposal logics and proposal psychologies. Proposals are more persuasive when they reflect the priorities of the sponsor. Novice proposal writers often focus on their own need for funds instead of matching their project's goals with the sponsor's priorities. Proposals are funded when they express the values shared by the sponsor. Projects are rejected when they do not precisely reflect the priorities of the sponsor.

Exhibit 1 illustrates how proposals with seemingly self-oriented needs can be recast to reflect sponsor-oriented values. Rather than focusing on your organization's need for funding,

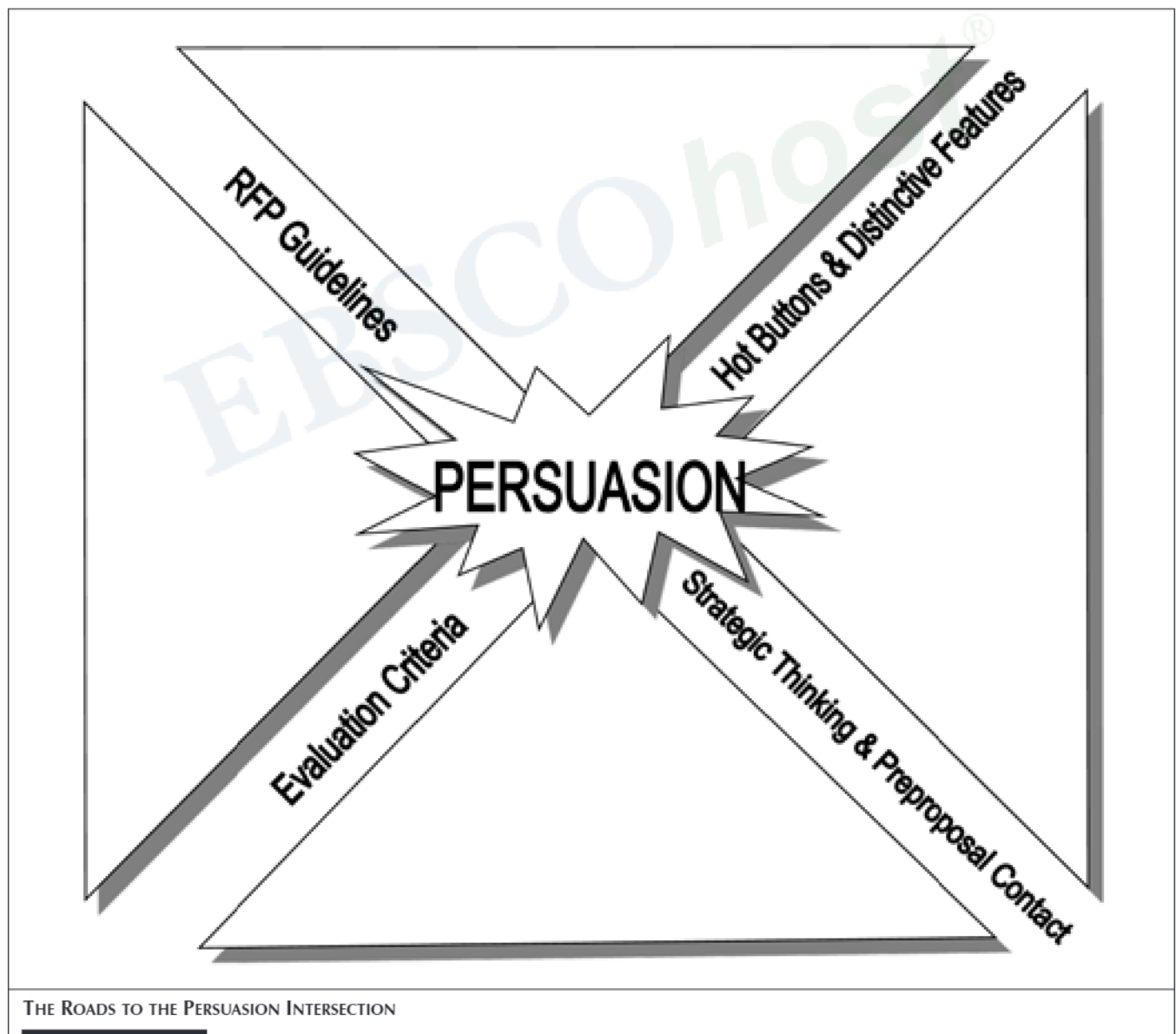
Self-Oriented Needs	Sponsor-Oriented Values
The Family Welfare Agency requests a grant of \$25,000 to meet its operating expenses.	The Family Welfare Agency invites your investment of \$25,000 to sustain the delivery of crucial services to victims of violence and abuse.
Top Flite High School invites you to share in a \$100,000 project to buy new tablet computers.	Top Flite High School invites your participation in a \$100,000 project to reduce student achievement gaps in science and mathematics.
La Casa de Esperanza requests your support of \$50,000 to hire a case manager.	La Casa de Esperanza invites you to share in a \$50,000 project to improve the quality of life for Hispanics with chronic health conditions.
Fairview Middle School, recently recognized by the governor as a "Center for Educational Excellence," requests a \$5,000 grant to pay for a guest speaker who will talk about teen bullying.	Fairview Middle School, recently recognized by the governor as a "Center for Educational Excellence," requests a \$5,000 grant to help decrease bullying behavior among teens.
Nature Academy is seeking a grant of \$17,500 to replace 300 trees that were lost during the August 2016 EF2 tornado.	Nature Academy seeks \$17,500 to build the capacity of individuals for creating an environmentally sustainable community.
An International Society grant of \$10,000 will allow me to travel to the national research archives in Munich, Germany and ultimately publish a manuscript on "EU Exchange: Spaniards with German Passports."	An International Society grant of \$10,000 will advance research on and understanding of the European Union's export and import process.
A "Partnerships for Health" grant of \$300,000 over four years will enable Midwestern Health System, ranked by <i>U.S. News & World Report</i> as one of the nation's elite providers, to build a multidisciplinary network and research base for policy on healthy food retail.	Midwestern Health System, ranked by <i>U.S. News & World Report</i> as one of the nation's elite providers, seeks \$300,000 over four years from the "Partnerships for Health" grant program to prevent obesity among at-risk groups in low-income communities.

EXHIBIT 1

equipment, and staff, think about who will ultimately benefit from these human, physical, and financial resources and the difference that will be produced in their lives. In all seven examples, the message is clear and simple: sponsors usually give money to organizations that help other people; sponsors seldom give money to organizations that help only themselves. You should select a sponsor that shares your view of the world and tailor proposals to them.

ROADS TO THE PERSUASION INTERSECTION

Persuasion is an interaction of elements. Proposal logics or proposal psychologies alone are not sufficient to persuade a sponsor to fund a project. The sponsor must also be involved and have a vested interest in your project and its outcomes. The Roads to the Persuasion Intersection bring together objective and subjective writing approaches to fine-tune your proposal so that it more closely matches sponsor values. As illustrated in Figure 2, this means navigating among RFP guidelines, evaluation criteria, hot buttons and distinctive features, and strategic thinking and preproposal contracts. Traveling these



four roads will deepen your understanding of the values of sponsors and will help you to persuade them that you can satisfy their needs.

RFP Guidelines

A Request for Proposal (RFP) is an invitation by a sponsor to submit a grant application. While some sponsors use other terms such as Funding Opportunity Announcement (FOA), Grant Announcement (GA), Request for Application (RFA), Program Announcement (PA), Broad Agency Announcement (BAA), Notice of Funding Availability (NOFA), or Solicitation for Grant Application (SGA), the invitations all spell out the details you need in order to develop a proposal. RFP guidelines generally provide an overview of what the funding announcement is all about, the background or problem that led to this invitation, priority funding areas, sample methodological approaches, timelines, deadlines, evaluation criteria, funds available, and acceptable uses of grant funds.

RFP guidelines also supply you with a first look at how sponsors view the world: magnitudes and key dimensions of problems they wish to solve. Some sponsors, however, do not issue specific RFP guidelines; rather, they may have broad guidelines that they use in all circumstances. Other sponsors, most notably small foundations, may not have any guidelines at all. In these cases, follow the generic structure described in Chapter 3 under “Developing the Proposal.” Chapter 4 examines an RFP from a private, special-purpose foundation that uses a three-stage application process. Chapter 5 interprets the broad instructions provided by a private, national foundation that uses a single-stage application process. Chapter 6 dissects the application guidelines issued by a state grantmaker that uses a two-stage application process. Chapter 7 scrutinizes an RFP from a federal government agency that uses a single-stage application process. And finally, Chapter 8 studies the guidance provided by an independent grantmaker that uses a single-stage application process.

Evaluation Criteria

Sponsors’ evaluation criteria describe technical aspects of the application process and proposal review procedures. RFP evaluation criteria help you to understand the logical components that must go into the proposal. These components are the sponsors’ minimum performance standards, the yardstick against which your proposal is being measured. Proposals that do not meet these minimum expectations will be rejected. To develop a proposal that meets sponsor expectations, however, you also need to know who is reviewing the proposals and the conditions under which they are being reviewed. You’ll write differently for general audiences who skim read compared to technical audiences who critically read proposals. (See Chapter 2, Exhibits 3 and 4 for detailed examples of review conditions and writing techniques.)

Strategic Thinking and Preproposal Contact

Strategic thinking forces you to understand your strengths and weaknesses in relation to the values of the sponsor. Your credibility and uniqueness—organizational, individual, and project—are strengths only to the extent that they fulfill sponsor needs. Contrary to popular belief, sponsors do not give money away. They contract with organizations offering services and programs that are consistent with their needs and interests. Sponsors award funds to make a difference in the lives of people. Strategic thinking demonstrates to sponsors that a good match exists between their priorities and your capabilities. Preproposal contact is a process for gathering supplemental information about sponsors and their values and priorities. Making contact with program officers, past grantees, and

past grant reviewers can help fine-tune your proposal, so it mirrors the sponsor's concern about specific problems, injustices, and inequities.

Hot Buttons and Distinctive Features

Hot buttons represent the logical and psychological concerns of the sponsor that have an impact on how the project will be conducted. Hot buttons are emphasized *repeatedly* in the RFP and preproposal contact, and gain force through their repetition. These primary concerns affect the shape of a project's structure and implementation processes. However, hot buttons are not always stated as evaluation criteria; watch for recurring themes such as accountability, collaboration, communication, cost-effectiveness, outcomes, participation, replication, and sustainability.

Sponsors may also have secondary concerns that influence the design of certain aspects of the project. Because secondary concerns do not appear repeatedly, they are not hot buttons; rather, they are distinctive features. Distinctive features appear as *singular* instances identified in the RFP and preproposal contact. They often reflect activities in which you are already engaged, yet the sponsor wants explicit assurance that you will continue to do them, e.g., comply with federal regulations, standardize treatment following national guidelines, be able to recruit and retain project participants. Other times, distinctive features are sponsor-imposed activities necessary to meet the terms of the grant, e.g., submit timely progress reports, participate in annual national project meetings, utilize resources provided by the sponsor.

Addressing hot buttons and distinctive features help you to establish a level of trust and understanding with the sponsor. Failing to attend to hot buttons in your proposal may leave a sponsor wondering whether your project truly has their best interest at heart: a potentially fatal flaw. Failing to acknowledge distinctive features in your proposal may be viewed by the sponsor as a controllable project weakness. As a result, you might miss out on indispensable half points or benefit-of-the-doubt consideration in a tight funding decision. In contrast, fully addressing hot buttons and distinctive features will make your proposal stand out from the competition.

Sponsors receive numerous requests for a limited pool of funding dollars. During the review process they discern among proposals by looking for weaknesses—faults in logic, facts, approaches, or conclusions. But even when the logic is sound, proposals may be rejected because they fail to establish a “connection” with the sponsor. On the other hand, persuasive proposals present a seamless argument that stands the test of reason, addresses psychological concerns, and connects project ideas to the values of the sponsor. In the next chapter we describe a systematic process for moving down the Roads to the Persuasion Intersection.

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