

Slingshot's Tips for Decline Phone Calls

This document was created by Slingshot staff and is a compilation of tips and thoughts from a group of professionals and grant makers at foundations.

General Tips:

- **Less is more.** Don't spend too much time listing out specific reasons that the organization didn't get a grant (you don't have a national impact, we are concerned with your budget, etc) and stick to the bigger picture. "While we respect and admire your organization, the grant process was very competitive this year, and we were not able to make all of the grants we would have liked to."
- **Respect for the mission.** It goes without saying that your contacts at each of these organizations is enormously accomplished in their field, and is operating a nonprofit during a very difficult time to find funding. Slingshot has respect for their mission, and regrets we can't do more.
- **You represent Slingshot.** You are informing them of a decision made by the Slingshot Fund as an organization and as a giving circle; you shouldn't feel as if you personally are saying, "no". And, regardless of your feelings about the decision making process, try not to speak disparagingly about any steps of the decision-making process – we hope these organizations will want to apply again in the future!
- **Be Honest and Respectful, but not Overly Apologetic.** Most of the organizations you're talking to will have had these kinds of experiences before, but they often do not receive direct feedback. Honor each applicant, and convey the decline in a way that shows our respect for the effort that each of them has invested in their application. But, don't be overly apologetic. It's one thing to say 'I'm sorry to inform you...' and another to apologize much more. There were probably good reasons why the program was not funded. Let someone down in a genuine way - these calls do not need to sound robotic.

At the end of the day, we're all on the same side and we all want to see these organizations reach their fullest potential and succeed.

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The phone call or conversation:

1) Introduction

- Introduce yourself if you haven't yet had personal interaction with the applicant.
- Thank them for the time they took to apply, and for setting aside time for a site visit.
- Let them know that how many organizations applied for grants, how many advanced to site visit rounds, and how many ultimately received funding.

2) Start Fast

- Let them know that the answer is No immediately. People appreciate straightforward-ness.
 - *It was a very competitive process, and although Slingshot supports your work, I regret to inform you that your organization will not be receiving funding this year. We were not able to fund every project that was worthy*
 - *We had an extremely competitive field of applicants. Your work is so important and our decision is not a reflection on the value of the work you are doing. We had to make tough decisions because of the competitive field and the limited dollars we have. Thank you so much for applying. We enjoyed learning about your organization and we appreciate the work it took for you to apply.*

3) Give Feedback

- **Individualize the call** for the particular organization.
 - Provide each caller with a bulleted summary of why the organization was declined, based on the comments from the fund members as well as notes from the selection meeting. Be Transparent without revealing more than our members would be comfortable with.
 - Share specific content from the selection meetings, but stay as general as possible.
 - If candidate wrote a crappy application, or positioned themselves poorly, which is why they were rejected, offer them one discrete recommendation for how they might improve how they talk about their work moving forward
 - *_____ needs to be articulated more clearly. Our committee did not understand _____*
 - *It seems like there are a lot of groups doing similar work, it was not clear to us how you work together and complement each other OR it was not clear to us in which ways your organization is distinct*
 - *Our committee was concerned that while you have given a lot attention to _____, you have given less attention to _____*
- **Stick to the criteria** - It's critically important to frame the declination in terms of the review criteria and how well the project did or did not meet those criteria as compared to the larger pool of applicants.
 - *our funding focus/goals differ each year depending on the Fund member's interests. This year we focused on X and your organization did not fit well into that criteria, we were looking for organizations that did more of XY or Z*

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- Some funders use analogies of getting into college, or of matchmaking. That is, that whether a foundation will fund your organization isn't a reflection on your merit as an organization, but rather on how well you "match" their interests. If Harvard needs a bassoon player to round out its student body, and you play the violin, then your perfect SAT scores will be beside the point. In other words, foundation grants are not based on merit alone, but also on how well your organization fits the portfolio.
- **Stay positive** - Mention one or two attributes about the organization that impressed you. Possible attributes, such as leadership, communication/design, resourcefulness, collaborative spirit, strategy, or even just the content area of the work and why it resonates with you
- **Expect push back** - An organization might try to "prove" that they deserve funding. Let them talk for a bit and then reply, *"That is an excellent point, and one which we examined, but at the end of the day we made this decision because..."*

4) Moving Forward

- Remind the applicant that this does not have an impact on their future selection to *Slingshot* guides, and you hope they will reapply for the grant next year.
- If they would like to further discuss the specific reasons they did not get funded, or if they would like to know how to improve their chances next year, please feel free to refer the organization to the Slingshot staff.
- If you'd like, suggest other ways you might be helpful
 - Connecting them with other possible funding opportunities and or colleagues if appropriate
 - Review/comment on documents, strategic plans – be a reviewer/advisor of sorts...
 - Connect them to other organizations/leaders/mentor whom they could learn from.
- You may choose to ask for feedback on the process. This helps the grantee reclaim some power by providing their perspective on something.