What follows is advice from the Dr. Joel Orosz, who was at the time a grants and program officer with the Kellogg Foundation.

When you approach a foundation, don't just look for areas of interest. Try to find the key leaders. Get as many names as you can. One of Joel's Laws of Foundations is that nobody gives grants to organizations. You give grants to people because you believe in them, think they can handle that money and do a great job with it. In this high-tech world, it's one of the last high-touch things that we have.

Also, foundations may say, "We fund in these areas." But it's always interesting to look at the actual things they've funded because sometimes what they say they fund and what they really fund bear no relation to each other. What they say they'll fund is one thing, but what they're actually funding is something very, very different. Knowing that can save you a lot of wasted effort.

You make the call

Once you've got your prospects, give them a call. Ask for every scrap of paper or CD-ROM or whatever they can send you. You may find something in a brochure, for example, that isn't listed on the foundation Web site.

Find out all you can but don't believe everything you read. An awful lot of what is printed is not there not to help you; it's there to protect the foundation. For example, the guidelines may tell you, "Please do not call the program officer. Send in a proposal." Ignore that piece of advice. They tell you that because it's a lot easier to say "no" to a piece of paper than to a real human voice over the phone.

Sometimes you will call and people will say, "Didn't you read our literature? It said 'don't call'." That's probably going to happen a few times, but more often people will talk to you and they'll find it harder to say no if you're on the phone than if you just send in the proposal.

A lot of the bigger foundations have an intake office. They'll say, "Please send your proposal to the Supervisor of Grants Processing," or something like that. That's the Bermuda Triangle of foundations! At Kellogg, we had four employees who did nothing all day long but read proposals and look for something to ding them, something that was out of scope, or not part of a strategic plan. They looked for naughty words like "endowment." And boom! The proposal was dead. No program officer ever saw it. So whatever you do, don't send it to an intake office. That is

crucial.

The most important person that you're going to talk to at the foundation is the secretary who answers the phone. Secretaries have enormous power to either forget you ever called or put you on the calendar. When you call, you should ask for a meeting with the program officer. Now, 99 times out of 100, even if the secretary likes you, you're not going to get it. But there is that one-out-of-100 chance that you'll get it. If you don't get a meeting, what you're probably going to get is, "We can't do a meeting at this early stage but could you send us a proposal?" That way, the proposal goes directly to the program officer. You avoid the dreaded intake office and you have a much better chance of getting a fair consideration for anything you send in.

Beware the third rail

When you're reading through the foundation's literature, there is usually some section that talks about what they don't fund. Memorize that before sending in a proposal. At Kellogg we had what we called the "third-rail" words. We said we don't do endowments, so if anywhere in the proposal the word "endowment" pops up, someone is going to circle it in big red letters and say, "We don't do that." Learn those third-rail words and make sure they're not in there.

There are also third-rail statements. The classic one is, "If you don't fund this project, it'll probably go out of business." Make sure you don't include any statements like that. They sound desperate or end-of-the-line.

Finally, have a friend read your proposal. You really are the expert on your proposal. You're going to know more about your subject than I will by a long shot. Because you're so close to it, it's too easy to throw in an acronym that I won't know. If you've got a program officer who is a little insecure, it underlines for them that they don't know these things, and they get kind of grumpy about it.

As grantseekers, you frequently don't have a long timeline. But it takes a while with a foundation and whenever you press them for a quick decision, you know what you're going to get quickly—a "no."

Foundation program officers firmly believe they earn their money by changing your proposals. If they ever got the perfect proposal they'd feel guilty about

recommending it for funding because they hadn't done their job. There are always going to be requests for revisions and little improvements, and little suggestions. It's just inevitable. So I wouldn't necessarily labor over making it a perfect proposal on the front end because it's going to come out the back end looking very different.

Two kinds of no—now and forever

If you do get one of those thoughtful, sensitive letters turning you down, what is almost never clear is what kind of "no" you've gotten. There are two kinds of "no." One is, "You were that close to making the cut and if you come back in the next round, you'd have a pretty good chance." The other is, "We hated this proposal and if we get another one from you, we'll burn it without reading it." So the question is, what kind of "no" did you get?

I would call and try to find out. It won't be easy to get the program officer because the last thing program officers want to do is talk to people they've just turned down. Many feel guilty about it or are afraid that the person on the other end of the phone will be irate. But definitely call and at least get the news from the secretary if you can't get the program officer. Is it no for now, or is it no forever? If it's no forever, you might as well find that out and stop wasting your time going back. Here's my list of a dozen great proposal traits:

1. Innovation as always

Foundations have an addiction, and that addiction is innovation. Foundations don't want to fund something that has been working well and is doing good stuff; foundations want to be involved in starting something new, something innovative, something untried, something promising. There are two ways to do this. First you can really start something new and innovative and untried and promising. The second is to at least make it sound like it's new, innovative…. Anyone who has been in the game for any length of time knows that's what you sometimes have to do to get a foundation grant. But avoid third-rail words like "continuing operations" or "tried and true project" because that just brings out the Ding Squad. It's not going to work, unless the foundation specifically says that they are willing to fund operating support for existing projects. That's a rare foundation—but if they do, terrific. If not, lean toward innovation.

2. Say you don't know

When I give this piece of advice, people always raise their eyebrows. I really like to see a proposal that says, "In this project, our organization has expertise in this, this and this but there are a couple of key areas where we don't have the expertise on staff." With the kinds of complex problems we're dealing with today, it's hard to find any organization that has everybody on staff they need. I like to see someone saying, "We have these gaps and we'd like to hire consultants to fill those gaps, and have a line item for consultants." I don't want to fund a know-nothing organization, but neither do I want to fund an organization that knows it all, and pretends they already have everything they need.

3. Attention to context

I like it when the applicant has done the needed homework, not just about the foundation but also about the context. Maybe you say, "We're not the only ones in LA. There's one in South Central, there's one downtown, and we're aware of their work, we talk to them, and we might cooperate with them in certain areas." To me, that says these folks really are on top of it. They know who's out there, they know who their possible friends and allies could be.

4. Client involvement

I think it's important that the applicant is doing the project with the people they're trying to help and not to the people they're trying to help. I see this a lot in youth proposals. When you start asking, you discover that no young person has been involved in writing the proposal, there's no young person on the advisory panel, there's no young person on the governance of the project. It's all folks my age who've cooked it up, experts on youth who are not young, and that is just not going to fly. If you can demonstrate that whatever population you're working with is there right from the get-go, helping you put this together, helping you to run it, that's tremendously impressive. You are walking the talk then. Otherwise, it's a little scary.

5. Avoid self-absorption

Again, this may sound like a semantic distinction. The applicant should be other-centered and not self-centered.

6. You get what you pay for

I like it when the applicant is willing to invest some of its own money in the project. I've had folks say, yeah, Mr. Genius, if we had lots of money we wouldn't be looking for a grant, now, would we? But here's the way that I look at it. There are a lot of competing priorities for any nonprofit organization and I want to invest in a top priority, not the 38th priority. And how do you tell me it's a top priority? Well, if the organization is willing to take some of its own money and invest it in the project from the get-go, that probably means that the project is right at the top of the priority list. And remember, other things are worth money: the time of key people, space in the organization, in-kind things.

7. Be obsessive

I really like to fund people who convince me they're going to do this project no matter what. If I turn them down, they're going to go to another funder and if that funder turns them down, they're going to go to another funder, and they're going to keep doing it until they get that money because this matters to them. If all else fails, they're going to go into the schoolyard and shake down kids for their lunch money! (Well, maybe that's where we cross the fine line between determination and fanaticism!) Anyway, they're going to get this done. They're committed to it.

8. Comprehensive benefits

The applicant should have a comprehensive approach if they're taking on a tough, complicated problem that demands a sophisticated solution. The proposals that say, "we're going to solve the drop-out problem in our community by starting an after-school program," make me think, "that's a start, but then these kids are still are going to lousy schools, they are going home through dangerous neighborhoods, they're still coming to school hungry." There are a million reasons why kids leave school. One single-shot program is not going to solve the bigger problem.

9. Team talk

The applicant should be willing to work collaboratively. Just as no one organization has the expertise on staff to solve all problems, usually it's going to take an alliance to do the work that has to be done. If you come in with that collaborative approach, it will get a very warm reception from most foundations.

10. Open to evaluation

It always helps the proposal if there's a genuine orientation toward evaluation. I know that evaluation can rub people in the nonprofit world the wrong way—when the evaluator is nothing more than a paid spy for the funding source. It's also unfortunate that we have funders who say you've got to have evaluations and then you say, okay, how much will you give me for it? "I didn't say I was going to GIVE you anything for it, you've just got to have evaluations." I've heard that little trick too.

11. A plan for continuation

If you send the proposal with a continuation plan already attached, that is a huge advantage. Most proposals I see never mention continuation at all because everyone's focused on getting the thing up and running. Or if they do mention continuation, it simply says "We'll seek other grants." But if you have a continuation plan that looks pretty plausible, it gives you a big leg up. Here's a radical thought: part of the continuation plan can be to say, and it's perfectly legitimate, that if you are successful in meeting your benchmarks, you would hope that the foundation would be willing to do second- or maybe third-stage funding.

12. Broader impact

There's nothing wrong with a really good project that would work only in Los Angeles, but it's even more exciting and potentially more valuable if the project is one that, with a little tweaking here and there, could work in Phoenix, could work in Chicago, could work almost anywhere. When your project looks like it has potential for broader impact, that's very helpful.

If you've ever seen the movie Cool Hand Luke, you know what the big problem is between grantseeker and grantmaker: "What we have here is a failure to communicate." Ninety percent of that failure rests squarely on the shoulders of foundations and other funders. They have not done a good job over the years of communicating what they're interested in; they have not done a good job of communicating how the process works. We have wrapped ourselves in mystery and I think it has harmed the whole process.

Slowly but surely this is beginning to change. More and more funders are beginning to communicate better, but my suggestion to you is to be relentlessly polite. If you're overly aggressive, foundations will blow you off. You all know that. But if you're polite and keep asking for more information, chances are you will get it.

The final piece of advice that I would give is to never be satisfied with third-rate treatment. Either leave those folks behind or continue to be relentlessly polite, asking for better treatment because it is important that there be a true partnership. Without it, the people we are trying to serve will get the short end of the stick.