Grants Management Intelligence:
Closing Grant Rounds

aigm | Australian Institute of Grants Management

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Starting Point:
Five Best Practice Tips
for Closing a Grants Round

Using the combined wisdom of our AIGM team, we've collected five quick best practice tips for closing a grants round.

1. Include the closing date and time for your grants round in every communication you have with applicants: letters, emails, information packs and application guides – even application forms?

2. Send out a confirmation letter or email when you receive an application? And if you do, what's in it? (See page 7 for more.)

3. Encourage applicants to get their applications in early, or well before deadline? It might be in vain given the data in our "Closing Times" feature (see page 2), but try to do it anyway!

4. Link clearly to your policy on late applications in all your communications – online, in print, via PDF? (For more on developing such a policy, see page 8.)

5. Place a timeline or countdown clock (or both) in a prominent spot on your website to constantly remind visitors of your program's deadlines? (See page 6 for an example.)

And one for the road – can prospective applicants (or, indeed, anyone) sign up to receive updates from you? If so, make sure you mention closing dates in these updates.

THEY SAID IT:

"I am one of those people who thrive on deadlines, nothing brings on inspiration more readily than desperation."

– Harry Shearer, US actor, satirist

Closing Grants Rounds Toolkit

When was the last time you thought about the closing date and time for your grants round? If you haven't done so for a while, it is time to take another look.

Key Learnings:

- 5pm and midnight are the most common grants round closing times
- Friday and Monday are the most common grants round closing days
- These are not the best times to close. You need to be around to provide help for grantseekers in case their systems fail – or yours do – and these are the times when you're least likely to be available to help.

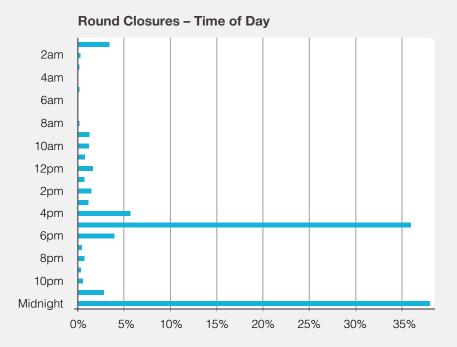## The AIGM's Best-Practice Recommendation:

We recommend you close your grants rounds at 3pm on a Monday. And if you have to close it at 5pm, we recommend you keep staff on hand and answering calls until 6pm.

What's the current situation?

The Time

5pm and midnight are overwhelmingly the preferred choices for Australian and New Zealand grantmakers – as shown by data from the region's leading online grants management system, SmartyGrants.

This data, drawn from tens of thousands of grants submissions across hundreds of grants rounds managed through SmartyGrants over the past five years, shows more than 70% of grants rounds have deadlines at either 5pm or midnight.[1]

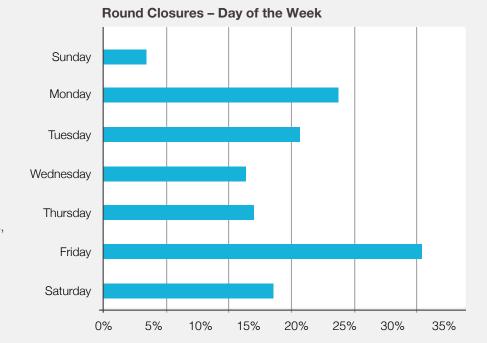**Round Closures – Time of Day**

1. This figure is actually likely to be significantly higher, taking into account time differences between SmartyGrants users across Australia and New Zealand and SmartyGrants' Melbourne HQ.

The Day

Drawing from the same SmartyGrants data, the following graph shows a clear preference for Friday as the deadline day for grantseekers to submit their applications.

More than a quarter of all grants rounds run through SmartyGrants closed on a Friday.

An interesting trend is the Monday closure. As the graph above shows, nearly 20% of grants programs run through SmartyGrants closed their applications on a Monday.

Round Closures – Day of the Week

What's the problem?

OK, we get it. It's been a big round. Everyone's exhausted. It's 5pm Friday – it's the end of the working week. The grantseekers have their applications in – you can turn off the computers and go home.

Umm, no. In truth, it's a really bad idea to set a Friday 5pm deadline for your grants to close (and midnight is even worse).

Here's why:

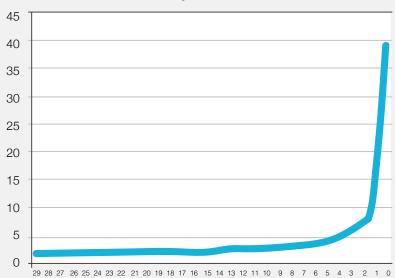### (1) Many applications flood in at the last minute

Of course, grantseekers are free to lodge an application any time they like – if they don't like 5pm Friday, they can lodge it at 2pm the same day, or at midday the day before, or a week before!

That's the ideal, but not the reality.

This data illustrates clearly what most grantseekers probably already suspect to be true.

- Around 35% of grants applications arrive in the 24 hours before deadline.

- Around a further 10% of grants applications are submitted in the last day or two before deadline.

% of submissions vs days until round closes

All graph data sourced from SmartyGrants

Like students submitting assignments (Come on, admit it, you were like this too once), many grantseekers – more than a third – don't get around to hitting "submit" until the last minute.

That's not say they haven't been working on their applications diligently for many days or weeks or even months, but a deadline's a deadline, and that's what most people focus on.

(2) Grantseekers might need help

You might have the most sophisticated of community grantseekers in the world, or the most naïve, but you can't predict if or when they'll need help. And if you're gone by 5pm (or – in the case of a midnight closing time – you're at the pub or in bed), there's going to be no one there to provide it.

The most common source of queries during the last few hours of a grant round is technical issues, but questions are also likely to include:

- I lodged my application – did you receive it? (Yes, they were sent an automatic email but they've put a lot of effort into this application; they want to receive confirmation from a human.)
- I can't lodge my application because:
  - The site has crashed
  - My computer's not working
  - [insert worthy excuse] – can I pretty please have an extension?

Lily Speaks

There are times where I think I've heard every excuse going around for why an applicant is asking for an extension to their deadlines ... and then I hear a new one!

Some of the "best" reasons I've heard in my time working with both funders and grantseekers using SmartyGrants have included:

- "I just started my application today..."
- "I went to submit at 4.59 but the round had already closed... meaning the clock was slightly out of sync"
- "I did not take into account the time difference" (which is why it is vital grantmakers specify exactly which time zone their deadlines are aligned to – AEST, for example).

And plenty more.

If there is one thing I could say – and one message I'd urge funders to pass onto grants applicants – it is this one:

"When filling in an application it is so important to leave enough time to check things like mandatory word limits, spelling and the amount of funding requested, as a minute or two before closing time is a horrible time to start trying to re-edit a project description if it is over or under a word limit".

Lily Fraser

Service & Administration Coordinator, Australian Institute of Grants Mangement

"Well, stuff them!", you might be tempted to think. "We gave them 12 weeks to prepare their applications! We had the phone lines open all that time, we had an FAQ posted on the site, we hosted information sessions. If they were going to leave it till the last second to lodge, that's their problem!"

All that is, of course, true. Except for one thing – **your grants program is about achieving outcomes.**

Any missed opportunity for an application means a missed opportunity for you to achieve the outcomes you want. Providing help is not about them, it's about you.

(3) You need to be on deck

Even the best-laid plans can go awry, as the Commonwealth's biggest grantmaker – the Department of Social Services – found out a couple of months back (see here - www.ourcommunity.com.au/aigm/article/?id=5942).

The DSS saw its system fail under the crush of grantmaker applications, and on deadline day, no less.

If no one had been around to monitor the website and answer the phones during those last frantic hours before deadline, the situation could have been disastrous. As it was, it was pretty bad, though the department did have contingency plans in place so it could respond quickly and grant a one-day extension to all applicants.

THEY SAID IT:

"Hurry up please, it's time."
– The Waste Land, TS Eliot

So what's the Solution?

When you close your grants round is of course up to you, but we suggest best practice is to close at 3pm on a weekday – preferably Monday, and definitely not Friday.

Keep staff on deck for an hour or two after 5pm, because many people will read the date, ignore the 3pm deadline specified, and assume the closing time is 5pm. Someone should be staffing the phones for this whole period.

"This will allow you to build relationships with grantseekers by helping and supporting them as they apply for your program, and ensure you don't miss out on any great applications," says AIGM Executive Director Kate Caldecott.

"If you're receiving applications online, a slightly earlier deadline allows for any technological hiccups to be reported and dealt with before time runs out."

The idea of a Monday deadline makes plenty of sense on a number of levels – not least from the strong anecdotal evidence gathered by both AIGM and Our Community that weekends are a popular time for grantseekers to put the finishing touches on their applications.

"Many people compiling grants applications for community organisations or other groups are volunteers," Kate says.

"The only time they might have available to work on their application – an application for what might be crucially important funding for their group – is on the weekend, or after normal business hours.

"To give applicants the best chance to present their best possible application, consider closing the grants round on a Monday so volunteers do have that extra time over the weekend to work on it."

And we'll say it once more: if you absolutely have to have a 5pm deadline, ensure you have staff on hand until at least 6pm to help late applicants and make the process as smooth as possible.

Anything else i need to think about?

A reminder about reminders

No one seeking money ever complained about getting too many reminders.

If you have an email list, schedule a reminder about the closing date to go out a week and then a day before the due date. Send text messages as well if you've got mobile numbers and have permission to use them.

Put reminders on your website as well – not buried four pages deep, but on the home page. A countdown clock can be useful too, as can a timeline like the one Google used for its recent Australian round of Google Impact Challenge grants. (see page 6)

Highlight key times and include links to your frequently asked questions (particularly the new ones that you've helpfully added during the round), your policy on late applications (for some ideas see page 8), contact details, and information about how and when your help lines will be staffed.

Review and improve

The data we've gathered (and will continue to gather) helps to draw a picture of the regional grantmaking landscape, but our recommendations may not be suitable for your particular program.

The best way to make sure you've got it right is to engage with your applicants.

After your round has closed (even before you've started assessing applications), consider asking your applicants what they thought about your timeframes and the process, and what they think you could do better next time.

Build up a body of knowledge to help inform your future grants rounds. Help grantseekers do the best job they can – which, in turn, will help you do your job as well.

Time for a Timeline

Google's recent Impact Challenge Australia grants program showcased a simple and functional way for funders to keep grantseekers in the loop.

Prominently displayed on the program's homepage (https://impactchallenge.withgoogle.com/australia2014) was this great little timeline, continually updated, showing the progress towards key program dates – grants submission deadlines, public voting deadlines, and dates for the announcement of grants winners.

The timeline also included a countdown clock, clearly showing the time remaining until specific key milestones and dates in the grant program passed.

This sort of clear, prominent timeline is easy to assemble and can be another way to better publicise the closing dates for your organisation's grants rounds. It can also tell applicants, at a glance, where your grantmaking processes are at, and what they can expect in the coming days, weeks or months.

Have you thought about timezones?

How do you deal with time zones when it comes to closing times for grants rounds? And if you specify a certain location's time as 'closing time' (for example, AEST), how convenient is that deadline for those in other time zones?

The status quo is not an option!
Join the Grantmaking Revolution.
www.smartygrants.com.au

What should you put in your "confirmation email"?

When grantseekers submit their application to you, what do they receive in return? (Note – If your answer is "nothing", then you're doing it wrong).

Sending a confirmation email or communication to grants applicants is more than just a courtesy, it is part of best practice to ensure grantseekers KNOW you have received their application.

Must haves:

So, what should you put in your confirmation email? The AIGM team shared some ideas:

Confirmation

Your message has to formally confirm receipt of the application. Include a reference number (or some form of record) in this email in case any applicants have queries. A contact number or details should also be included.

A thankyou

Thanking the applicant for applying for funding is courteous, but it is also common sense. Any application coming your way is another opportunity for your program to achieve its aims (and to justify its existence).

Process and expectations

Any confirmation email should also be informative. It should inform applicants as to when submissions will be reviewed, when they can expect to hear back from the grantmaker, and how the process will progress from here. Providing this information in your confirmation email might well save you time in responding to queries later on.

Value-adds:

These are the minimum requirements for any confirmation email. But there are always a couple of extra "value-adds" to consider:

A feedback survey

Sending out a link to an online feedback survey as part of a confirmation email can attract more people to fill it out "in the moment" and give you more, or more honest, feedback.

Plug your work

A simple link and "Do you know we funded this last time around?" is a great way to promote what your grants program has helped achieve in the past, as well as highlight a successful past project.

Links to other things

Do you have some news you wish to share? An announcement? Maybe just an offer for people to sign up for updates? If so, think about including this too.

Of course, don't overload your confirmation email. Two or three paragraphs plus a post script should be plenty.

Have you ensured your grants round's closing dates are consistent across your website and forms?

Never forget: the job's not done until you've cleaned up the mess. Get someone who has nothing to do with your program to give your webpages a once-over before you set them loose on the public.

After Closing a Grants Round

When you've closed a grants round, make sure you tell people.

That sounds like common sense, but it is amazing how many groups overlook this vital step amid the rush of applications that (more often than not) come right on deadline.

And overlooking it can lead to phone calls from confused applicants and inquiries that could easily be avoided.

So, next time you run a grants round, write yourself a reminder (in your diary, smart phone, computer, all three!) to update your organisation's website as soon as the deadline passes.

It's as easy as inserting some text on your organisation's home page, and on the section of your website that provides details about grants and grants rounds.

Something like this, perhaps:

> **Please note: Our *(Grant Program Name)* has closed for the year.**
>
> We have now begun working through applications and assessing them. We expect to notify applicants of the outcome of their applications on July 1.
>
> Watch this space for next year's program, or contact Jo Bloggs on (09) 9999 1234 or jo@grantmaker.com.au

It is quick, easy and provides a plug for a future grants round as well as the name of the contact person within the grantmaking organisation.

It's a good idea to send a similar message to people who have subscribed to receive email alerts about your grants program.

Taking a few short minutes to complete this task in a timely manner can spare some heartburn in the days after you close a grants round.

What do we do with late applications?

The vast majority of grantmakers aim to do everything possible to ensure grantseekers get their applications in before the round closes.

But even in the most perfect of worlds, this can be a challenge. What you need, in addition to your best-practice endeavours in closing a grants round, is a clear, easy-to-understand policy on late applications, covering:

- Under what circumstances a late application will be accepted (or rejected).
- Who decides (and how it is decided) whether a late application will be accepted.

Your policy should be clear in your grant guidelines.

The AIGM's great Grantmaking Toolkit (http://www.ourcommunity.com.au/best_practice/toolkit) offers this wording as a starting point:

"Completed applications need to be received by the grant program manager by the advertised closing date (date). Applications received after this date will not be eligible for consideration under this grants program.

If there is a question over whether an application is deemed ineligible because it was submitted late, this matter will be resolved by the grants program manager."

A couple of local grantmakers we contacted pointed to similar policies – late applications were generally not accepted, and were accepted only at the discretion of the program manager.

This type of stance isn't a bad one, but it lacks an explanation of the circumstances under which your organisation might accept a late application.

NIH policy hits the mark

For a great example of a very detailed and very clear policy, you can't go past the US National Institutes of Health (NIH).

The NIH is a key medical research agency aligned with the US Department of Health and Human Services. It offers all manner of grants each year (see: http://grants.nih.gov/grants/oer.htm).

Its policy on late submissions is as comprehensive as you would expect from such an organisation, and its examples of "reasons that might be accepted" and "reasons that are not acceptable" are useful reference points:

Examples of reasons late applications might be accepted:

- Sudden serious/acute illness of applicant or member of applicant's family.
- Death of member of applicant's family.
- Applicant was required to serve on an NHI review group or board, and the time could otherwise have been used on the application.

Examples of unacceptable reasons for late applications:

- Failure to complete required registrations by the due date.
- Heavy teaching or administrative responsibilities.
- Ongoing or non-severe health problems.
- Attendance at scientific meetings.
- Having a very busy schedule.

NIH accepts late applications only in the most serious of circumstances. Importantly, the policy also states clearly that permission for late submission of an application will never be granted in advance.

A "late window"

One final feature of the NIH policy is a clear set of deadlines by which late applications may be considered.

This "window of consideration for late applications" ranges from one to two weeks depending on the grants program.

Allowing a late window or grace period for late applications is a useful provision. But grantmakers need to be aware that a late window can't stay open forever, and they should clearly spell out its length.

To read the full NIH policy, visit: http://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/notice-files/NOT-OD-11-035.html

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THEY SAID IT:

"I love deadlines. I like the whooshing sound they make as they fly by."
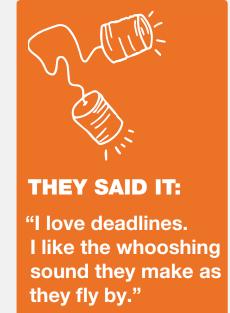
– Douglas Adams, author

Just a thought...

"How easy is it for people to find your policy on late applications? Are there links around your site? Are there links in your communications with them? Make it (and a contact number) easy to find in case grantseekers need to use it."