Most experienced investigators acknowledge that early contact with a program official (PO) can be the difference between a funded and non-funded submission.

For example, PO’s can:

- Clarify the fit of the scientific concept with the sponsor’s priorities;
- Give advice regarding funding mechanism, budget, and project duration;
- Comment on project design;
- Answer questions about guidelines or procedures; and
• Offer insight into the review process, e.g., verify what methodologies are preferred by reviewers.

A PO’s initial reaction to the proposed research may be the best indicator of success.

Since the job of most program officers is to solicit the most relevant and high quality proposals, POs are usually eager to answer questions. Yet young investigators are often reluctant to make contact.

Here are a few tips for how to approach a PO.

1. **Do your homework:** Make sure you are familiar with the agency’s website and grant guidelines, so that you are not asking the PO what is publicly known. This is not an informal chat. Remember – first impressions are critical – be prepared!

2. **Email first:** Inform the PO that you are considering applying for the grant opportunity and either state your *specific* issue/questions, or ask if he or she may be able to assess the attached summary (1 – 2 pp.) for programmatic relevance.

   Ask if s/he would rather talk on the phone and give your number. If you have not heard back in a week or so, it is appropriate to follow-up with a phone call or short message.

   POs’ personalities are as varied as the rest of us in terms of responsiveness – be patient – don’t be a “pest.” *(Note: email allows you to keep a record of contacts and responses.)*

3. **The summary of your proposal (attached to email) should represent your “elevator” talk:** Briefly review aims, methods, expected outcomes; no jargon or too much detail or; state where this will lead.

4. **Good working relationships can be further developed at professional meetings,** where the discussion may be more informal. You also can visit POs when you are in DC or their home city; arrange in advance and come with questions. Often POs can give insight beyond what is found in the written or posted materials.

   Remember: don’t be shy! (and always be gracious …).