GRANTS AND PITCH COMPETITIONS

Money you don't pay back: where to find it, how to apply, and how to spot fake grant offers.

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AT A GLANCE

- **Grants** are money you don't repay and don't give ownership for. **Pitch competitions** award prizes for the best business pitch.
- They're competitive and often small, but they're **non-dilutive** (you keep your ownership) and boost your credibility.
- Real grants **never charge you a fee** to receive the money.

Why it matters

For founders without access to wealthy investors, grants and competitions can provide early cash, publicity and connections. Winning one also signals to lenders and investors that others have vetted your business.

Where grants come from

Source	Examples of what they fund
Local governments	Storefront improvements, small business recovery, hiring in certain areas
State economic development agencies	Job creation, innovation, specific industries
Federal programs	Research-based innovation (in the US, programs like SBIR and STTR for technology research)
Foundations	Businesses in underserved communities, specific missions
Corporations	Programs for women, immigrant, Black, Latino and young founders
Universities and schools	Student and alumni ventures
Chambers of commerce and community groups	Local business support

Pitch competitions

Pitch competitions are run by universities, accelerators, chambers, corporations and community groups. Prizes range from small cash awards to larger checks, plus mentoring and introductions. Even if you don't win, you practice your pitch and meet people.

Step by step

1. **Make a list** of grants and competitions that fit your location, industry, background and stage. Ask your local small business center.
2. **Read the rules carefully.** Check eligibility, deadlines, what the money can be used for, and reporting requirements.
3. **Reuse your materials.** Your one-page plan, pitch deck and financials cover most questions. See **I-10 The One-Page Business Plan**.
4. **Answer the question asked**, in plain language, with numbers.
5. **Show impact.** Explain who benefits: customers, jobs, your community.
6. **Track your applications** and deadlines in one place.
7. **Report back** on how you used the money, if required.

> EXAMPLE
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> **Amara** applied to six grants and two pitch competitions in a year. She won a $5,000 local foundation grant for women-owned businesses and second place ($2,500) at a university pitch night. The pitch night also led to a meeting with a retail buyer who placed her first wholesale order.

> WATCH OUT
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> **Grant scams** are common. Warning signs: you're contacted out of the blue, told you "qualify" for a grant you didn't apply for, or asked to pay a fee, give bank login details or buy gift cards. Real grant programs don't charge fees to receive money. See **R-23 Red Flags and Funding Scams to Avoid**.

Common mistakes

- **Applying to everything** instead of the best fits.
- **Copying and pasting** answers that don't match the question.
- **Missing deadlines.**
- **Relying on grants** as your only funding plan.
- **Paying for grant lists or "guaranteed" grants.**

Your checklist

- ☐ List 10 grants and competitions that fit you
- ☐ Check eligibility and deadlines for each
- ☐ Prepare a reusable set of answers and documents

- ☐ Apply to your top three this quarter
- ☐ Track applications and follow-ups

Key words, explained

Word	What it means
Grant	Money given for a purpose that you don't repay.
Non-dilutive	Funding that doesn't reduce your ownership.
Eligibility	The rules for who can apply.
SBIR / STTR	US federal programs funding small business research and development.

Where to go next

- **R-19 Telling Your Story: The Pitch**
- **R-18 Building a Pitch Deck**
- **R-23 Red Flags and Funding Scams to Avoid**

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