

Sponsorship: The Holy Grail of Association Prosperity

The word has come down from on high. Your Board has seen the numbers. You need more money. Membership fees are as high as they can go (though your Board isn't quite convinced). Advertising revenue is off a bit, but no reason to panic. You need to "kick things up a notch." The message is clear: sponsorship.

Sponsorship of your newsletter, seminars, gala dinner, breakfast and luncheon addresses, conference, trade show, and the third floor office reception area – anything and everything is up for grabs.

However, before you go knocking on the doors of all those companies that must surely recognize the self-evident value in reaching your members, there are a few things to keep in mind.

First of all, let's define what we're talking about. Sponsorship is an investment by a corporation in a not-for-profit organization or property in exchange for commercial benefits. Sponsorships are business relationships. They are not charitable contributions, philanthropy, or grants.

Why do companies sponsor? Their objectives may include increasing sales, targeting a specific market, increasing customer and employee loyalty/retention, and/or enhancing branding/imaging. It's important to note that over the past 10 years, sponsorship expenditures in North America have increased by approximately 250%.

Notwithstanding increased sponsorship expenditures, competition for sponsorship dollars is intense. As a result, companies are taking a much more strategic approach to sponsorships and are assigning higher level employees, outside experts, and more sophisticated measures to evaluating sponsorship proposals in terms of business value.

If you're going to compete, you need to treat sponsorships as seriously as your potential sponsors – and your competition – do. Here's what a potential corporate sponsor wants from you:

- A sophisticated, professional pitch. An exciting and detailed, yet concise, proposal clearly outlining the bene-

fits of a sponsorship and the associated pricing, coupled with persistent (but dignified) follow-up.

- **An audience that matters.** Companies want to be where the decision-makers are. If your members don't make the decisions about their products or services, companies will take a pass.
- **A wide audience.** Not just the people who may attend your event, but those who are exposed to promotion.
- **Sales.** Not just the potential for future sales. Sales now. At the event. To your members.
- **Your database.** Oh, yes, they want the hot link from your Web site, the signage and acknowledgment at the event or an event, etc. They also want to know chapter and verse about your members.
- **Delivery on benefits.** Signing the agreement is just the beginning.
- **Communication.** Let your sponsors know how things are going. Sponsorships are partnerships and, as such, are a time consuming, relationship building exercise.

In short, the days of companies sponsoring because they "padded the marketing budget" are gone. Sponsoring companies will reward the victors not only with cash in hand, but with a mutually beneficial, ongoing relationship! ♦

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