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Top 10 Tips on How to Obtain a Corporate Sponsor for Your Association

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By Nancy Michaels

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1. **Sponsor customer base should reflect yours**

First, know who your market is. Your ideal sponsor is a company or organization that can benefit from having exposure to your association's membership. Identify a sponsor based upon their need to have their products or services be known and recognized among their target market – which should be yours as well. It is possible to use more than one company or organization to co-sponsor a program. For example, my target market is women and minority business owners. Corporations going after the same market would be any company targeting small business owners, such as banks, credit card companies, office supply stores, computer companies, and my current vendors. My staff and I flipped through small business publications to see who was advertising—these were our prospects for our corporate sponsored 20-City Grow Your Business Tour we recently conducted.

2. **Generate a winning idea**

Consider the market you've identified for your business message. Next, think about some unique ways you can deliver this message to your clients via a corporate sponsor. Newsletters, web sites, seminars, conferences, and advertisements are some venues for partnering with a sponsor. You can either generate a fabulous new idea or recreate an old one. Think about how you can recharge your current products and materials and leverage your area of expertise. I turned one of my popular seminar topics into a speaking tour to women's associations, a new web site, a bi-weekly e-zine, a series of web casts, and a 200 page manual.

3. **Become desirable in the eyes of your corporate prospects**

Do your homework. The company's vision and goals should align with those of your association. Learn as much as you can about the companies you're seeking as sponsors through their websites, annual reports, signing up for online press release distribution, research at Hoovers.com, and Google searches. Mold your message so it is in line with sponsors' goals. Support your statements with facts and statistics.

4. **Be prepared with the details**

When making the initial phone call, be prepared to give details on your program, event or opportunity and to answer tough questions. You should be able to explain why they are the logical sponsor, dates/locations, expected attendees, how much money you are requesting, what is expected of the sponsor, what they need to do before, during, and after, and what type of recognition they will receive.

5. Offer them exposure

Determine what type of exposure each sponsorship level will garner. You might want to sell a platinum level sponsorship package for \$100,000 that includes significantly more than the bronze level for \$20,000. Some ideas of what to offer include advertising in electronic materials, listing in the company program with their logo, signage in the meeting room, display table or exhibit booth space, ads in publications, website listing, logo on handouts, opportunity for a company representative to introduce the speaker, mention in press releases, and so on.

6. Provide them with the data (list of attendees/membership list)

The biggest draw for corporations sponsoring events is to get the attendee list, so they can follow up and leverage their sponsorship dollars. Provide your sponsors with snail mail and email addresses of all participants by collecting business cards through a raffle and/or the registration process. This provides sponsors a chance to follow up with attendees and present a compelling reason to do business with them. You might also volunteer to push a thank you e-mail on behalf of the sponsor as well. It is also an effective way to gauge the effectiveness of the program.

7. The approach—access the highest level person at the corporation

The CEO is clearly the most desirable person to introduce your idea to and meet with. Realize the value of his or her assistant in making contact with the CEO. Even if the CEO pushes you down the ranks, his or her request carries considerable weight. However, make sure the contact you end up meeting with is the most appropriate decision-maker, someone who can get your idea put into action. If not, revisit the head honcho to keep him or her posted as to your progress.

8. Present an outstanding proposal

At this point you should be prepared with the details of what you will say and offer in terms of exposure. Now, you need to learn to position yourself as an expert association. Your presentation should include professional materials that exceed their expectations. As the presenter, look your best and be well-prepared, especially for challenging questions or initial objections. Set realistic goals for beginning the partnership. Include compelling reasons for your prospects to sign on with your program. Support your proposal with examples of work you have done in the past and testimonials from satisfied past sponsors.

9. Follow up persistently

Your presentation may be over, but your work is not. Send appropriate thank-you notes and/or gifts to your contact at the corporation. A handwritten note after the meeting is always a wise move. Keep your business in front of the corporation with high-quality direct mail pieces. E-mail and/or call to keep in touch when necessary. Provide constructive feedback and begin to cultivate relationships with others in the company.

10. Retaining sponsors for repeat business

Once you've landed a sponsor, it can be tempting to step back and focus on fulfilling the terms of your sponsorship contract. However, this is a crucial period where you need to satisfy your sponsors, prove that the investment has been worthwhile, and maximize these relationships. Sponsorships shouldn't end when the contract is up. There are a multitude of opportunities for spin-offs and continued work together. How do you do this? – under promise and over-deliver. Set benchmarks that are attainable and beneficial to your sponsor and document your successes. Provide sponsors with additional resources and serve as a top-notch consulting association to maximize the value to them. Keep track of positive feedback and continue to treat your sponsor as a valued client by keeping them informed of your membership achievements by staying in touch.

Nancy Michaels is a business development coach, author, speaker and consultant. She can be reached at nmichaels@growyourbusinessnetwork.com

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