

Whose Event Is This Anyway?

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Clark Thomas, MPA, CAE

Event sponsorships can enhance your budget but they often come with strings attached. An M&E Section Council member provides a checklist of ways to ensure your sponsored events meet the expectations of everyone involved.

Consider yourself fortunate if you've had the opportunity to enhance your events through corporate sponsorships. In many instances, we as association meeting professionals would not be able to afford the expenditures necessary to turn a common event into an uncommon experience without an influx of revenue from corporate sponsorships.

Truly, sponsorships can increase our event budgets to include the latest technologies and the hottest trends, but those contributions often are driven by anything but altruistic intentions. Woe be unto the planner when these scenarios result in battles of interests and wills between the association and sponsors.

How can you graciously accept and recognize the support of sponsors while protecting your association's integrity and remaining competitive in today's ever-growing pool of event sponsorship opportunities?

The following is a checklist to consider when planning and executing sponsored events.

Research, Target, Stay Focused

Begin by identifying prospective companies who conduct business with members of your association. Conduct an Internet search, and obtain copies of competitors' programs and events to identify prospects that are already sponsoring events that impact your members. Target companies that offer the best fit with the products or services your members purchase and use frequently.

Once identified, consider sending a list of companies you are prospecting to your volunteer leadership. Chances are they will have contacts with some of those targeted companies that will help initiate a dialogue regarding sponsorship opportunities at your events.

Prepare, Pitch, and Propose

Once you've identified targeted prospects, focus on the companies that exhibit the best fit as well as those who appear most willing to work with what you have to offer. No one wants to turn sponsorship dollars away, but avoiding difficult or highly demanding sponsors can save you major headaches down the road.

Prepare to pitch your event by providing the estimated number of attendees, determining approximate sponsor exposures or impressions to your attendees, formalizing the value you can offer a potential sponsor, etc. Reach out to the individuals you have identified via initial contacts to determine the decision-makers for corporate sponsorship and conduct a soft sale of the value your event can deliver to their company. Don't forget to ask for their feedback on what they would consider to be the greatest return on investment from participation in your event. Take any feedback you receive and incorporate these details into your draft of a sponsorship proposal.

Document All Stipulations in Writing

After confirming interest and leads from your prospective sponsors, ensure that you document deliverables of value to both your association and their company. These deliverables could be things like the guaranteed number of recognitions of support via printed materials or the time you will provide the

sponsor to interface with your attendees. Be careful to promise only what you are certain you can deliver. Nothing will sour a sponsor relationship quicker than promising something that you can't deliver.

Make certain all expectations for both parties are detailed in a written agreement to which you and your sponsor can refer prior to, during, and following your event. Such documentation can avert misunderstandings that could hurt the new relationship you're building.

Deliver Value to All Who Are Involved

Ensuring the delivery of value to all parties involved in your event requires a great deal of work on your part. Advance planning for execution of recognition leading up to, on-site, or following your event is crucial to sponsorship success. Frequent contact with sponsors, vendors, and other individuals who will assist in the activation of your sponsor's recognition can go a long way toward thwarting any surprises and providing an extraordinary event.

Evaluate All Aspects and Offer Analysis

Keep in mind that your sponsors' evaluation of your event will begin the day you reach out to them for support and will continue well into their fiscal year via sales reporting that provides evidence of the value you delivered. Take time to partner with your sponsoring companies and make efforts in advance of and following your event to aid your sponsors' analysis.

Supplement their return on investment models with a follow-up report that shows where you met, exceeded, or possibly fell short of the deliverable you agreed upon. It is better to take charge of the evaluation process than to wait to hear from a sponsor about what they liked or disliked about the event. By being proactive, you can often steer the sponsor's focus toward the most positive of event outcomes.

Think Toward Your Next Event

Bear in mind the customer service and relationship management you bring to an event will directly impact your potential to secure future sponsorships. By working well with sponsors, you can increase the likelihood that they understand the deliverables connected with an event and avoid uncomfortable scenarios where the sponsor exerts too much control over the logistics and execution of the event itself. Navigate the terrain of your event timeline in such a manner that you allow for significant sponsor input but limited overall control.

Also, embed opportunities for your sponsors to identify future possibilities for support. A sponsor that respects how you execute on their behalf is one that is likely to consider how to partner with you in the future.

By covering your bases up front, you'll be well on your way to ensuring event success. But, under no circumstances should you lose sight of the fact that you represent the owner of the "property" or event. Regardless of the sponsor's objectives or wishes, you must stand ready to defend the integrity of your organization and events while guaranteeing a return of value to the supporting company.

The research, preparation, documentation, value provision, analysis, and forethought you bring to the table will make or break your event sponsorship success. Always keep an eye out for fresh ideas and a finger on the pulse of event trends, and don't forget to tap the resources ASAE and the M&E Section Council can provide.

With expanded professional skill sets and a little luck, you can avoid the dreaded question, "Whose event is this anyway?"

Clark Thomas, MPA, CAE, is a member of the M&E Section Council, Chair of its Public Relations Subcommittee and executive director of the Atlanta-based Georgia Psychological Association.