



TOP

TIPS FOR SPONSORSHIP SEEKERS

By Kim Skildum-Reid

When I first wrote this white paper, best practice sponsorship was just starting to take hold. Sponsors, spurred on by new accountability that arose from the Great Recession, were becoming far more sophisticated. Sponsorship seekers were playing catch-up then, and many are still playing catch-up now.

These updated and expanded tips aren't just about getting the process right, or making the offer right. They're also about differentiating your organisation from the plethora of other organisations seeking sponsorship. Most of them set the bar low, and sponsors hate that. But if you demand more from yourself and your organisation, and commit to best practice, I can't guarantee that you'll get a "yes", but you will get their attention, and that's more than most can claim.

### Get Over Yourself

This is less a tip than a mindset, but it's a precursor for everything else having to do with best practice sponsorship.

I don't care how great your organisation is, how many trophies you have, how much good you do in the world, or how venerable your history, because sponsorship is not about you, and your need to get over yourself.

As much as you'd like to think so, sponsors aren't interested in aligning with your organisation. They want to align with the people who care about what you do – your fans. To sponsors, your role is simply to be an effective conduit, through which they can nurture that relationship. The more you can embrace that role, the better, and more valuable, a partner you'll be.

### Focus on Meaning

When you take stock of where your real value lies, you need to take the focus off the tangible benefits you provide because, frankly, thousands of other organisations are providing the same tangible benefits, and by making that what you're selling, you're commoditising yourself. Instead, put the focus on what's powerful; put the focus on the meaning...

- What does your organisation/ event/program/whatever mean to your fans? Why do they care?
- How can a sponsor do something meaningful to make the fan experience even better, creating

a "win" for the fans?

- How can a sponsor use the sponsorship to demonstrate how they share priorities or values with the fans?
- How can this sponsorship deliver meaningful value against the sponsor's objectives – changing perceptions and behaviours?

By shifting the focus, you're changing the game. It's no longer a transaction for commodity benefits, where price rules the deal. It's the establishment of a vision – what this means for their brand – and precisely why that is worth their investment.

### Ensure Your Expectations Are Realistic

This message is as much for senior executives and boards as it is for frontline sponsorship people, and maybe more so.

Sponsorship isn't some kind of panacea, there for the asking to fill any gaps in your budget. Securing sponsorship is *hard*, even for major, established properties, and your skills are next-level sophisticated. If you're a smaller, less established, or less experienced organisation, it's going to be even harder. That's not to say securing sponsorship is impossible – far from it – but your organisational expectations have to be in line with commercial reality.

### If Your Property is New(er)...

- Making your event or property dependent on sponsorship to be viable in the early years is a very bad idea. Sponsorship raised should be considered a bonus, not a must.
- If you're so busy establishing yourself that you can't commit to doing sponsorship properly, then don't do it. Phoning it in is a guaranteed fail.
- Don't look at established properties for the benchmark on price. Your lack of a track record is likely to impact the fees you can charge.

### And Some Advice for all Sponsorship Seekers...

- Picking some round number, like 20%, for increasing your sponsorship budget every year doesn't mean you automatically have 20% more commercial value. This is particularly the case if you're focussing your offers on benefits that are in limited supply, such as signage, tickets, appearances, and hospitality.
- The fees you can charge aren't going to automatically go up every year. Lots of things can push fees down, including shifting trends, scandals, your property's performance, other options in the marketplace, media support, and economic factors.
- The best option for increasing your sponsorship income is to develop best practice offers anchored on big ideas.

Of course, there are exceptions on all of these, but they are rarer than you might think.

### Send Fewer, (Much) Better Proposals

Sponsorship sales used to be about sending as many virtually identical proposals as possible, then making hundreds and hundreds of increasingly desperate follow-up phone calls. This tip turns that process on its head, by shifting the bulk of the workload to what you do *before* you create the proposal. That's right, preparation is more important than persistence.

Before you pitch, do your homework. For every potential sponsor, you need to know about their brand, objectives, priorities, and target markets.

As a result of all of that preparation, you'll identify who your most likely prospects are, why the sponsorship will work for them and their target markets, and hot buttons you can push to pique their interest. In other words, you'll have all of the ingredients to create maybe a couple of dozen amazing, bespoke proposals. It's far more work up front, but both your strike rate and the value of each proposal will be higher.

### Anchor Your Proposals on Big Ideas

Great proposals have a number of characteristics. They concentrate on sponsor needs, not your needs. They follow a clean story arc. But the most important thing in any sponsorship proposal is the big leverage ideas you feed to the sponsor.

Leverage is what a sponsor does with a sponsorship to turn it from the opportunity you're selling to the results they need. It is the sponsor's responsibility to come up with leverage

Most sponsorship seekers vastly underestimate the number of people that a sponsor can impact with a sponsorship. Festivals reference the 15,000 people who attend. Charities talk about the size of their databases or the number of donors. Conference organisers are all about the registrations. But all of those vastly underestimate the leverageable audience.

ideas, implement them, and pay for them. But (and this is a big “but”), by providing a complement of creative, strategic leverage ideas within your proposal, you create a vision for what this can do for their brand.

It does several things:

- It demonstrates your property’s relevance, so they can immediately see the benefit to their brand.
- The offer is easier for your contacts to sell internally.
- You’re doing half of their work for them, and who doesn’t want that?
- Because you’re doing that work on their behalf, your sales window will be somewhat extended.

It’s the difference between selling a car based on a list of all of the parts that went into building it, and selling it based on how that car will make your life better, how it meets your functional and emotional needs, how it aligns and showcases who you are and what you’re about.

There are major sections on both developing these ideas and formalising your proposal in *The Sponsorship Seeker’s Toolkit 4th Edition*. [Click here to purchase a copy.](#)

### **Don’t Underestimate Your Relevance**

Most sponsorship seekers vastly underestimate the number of people that a sponsor can impact with a sponsorship. Festivals reference the 15,000 people who attend. Charities talk about the size of their databases or the number of donors. Conference organisers are all about the registrations. But all of those vastly underestimate the leverageable audience.

First off, you need to remember your remote fans. There are people who care about what you do that may not, for whatever reason, attend your event or buy a ticket for the game. How many

people are interested in the band, but didn’t get tickets to your concert? How many people are interested in the topic of your conference, but didn’t get to attend? These people may not have added directly to YOUR bottom line – buying tickets or whatever – but they have a lot of value to a switched-on sponsor that commits to adding value to their very different fan experience.

Then, you need to think about the larger themes. What is your property about? What traits do you represent? Because those larger themes are also things that a sponsor can leverage. You run the largest Italian food festival in Canada? Foodies all over Canada could be interested in that. Run a charity providing support to injured veterans? How many sponsors could hook into the larger themes of dedication and grit and heroes and so much more?

The important thing to focus on is not how many people you get in one place, but how many people care, and that’s likely to be many times what you’ve been selling.

### **Get into the Marketplace Early**

Your sponsorship sales window is finite, and has absolutely nothing to do with when you have the time or staff

to do it. This is another one of those areas where you need to accept that your agenda doesn’t drive the process.

The sales window *starts* when you’ve got something firm and credible to sell. If what you’re doing is new, this means your dates are confirmed, you’ve got permits or permissions, you’ve put in both significant money and effort, and everything is 100% going ahead, whether you get sponsors or not.

The sales window *ends* when sponsors no longer have the time to make a decision, plan their leverage programs, and implement those leverage programs. That’s likely at least several months.

### **Never, Ever Sell Out Your Fans**

The biggest, overarching principle behind best practice sponsorship is the idea that it’s win-win-win. You win, the sponsor wins, and the fans win. Importantly, you need to accept that if the fans don’t win, nobody wins – I don’t care how much money a sponsor offers.

- Don’t sell sponsorship benefits that you know the fans will hate. Example: Requiring all ticket sales to be done with a Visa card.
- Don’t let sponsors leverage in ways that are disrespectful, overbearing, or otherwise diminish, the fan experience. Example: You offer lots of social media options, hoping they’ll create some great content for fans, but they keep hammering your followers with completely unrelated ads.
- Don’t brand bloody everything. Example: “Welcome to the Ethos Bank Jazz Sessions on the Fiji Water Stage, part of the amazing Prudential Lake Fest!” (Most televised sports coverage could be used as an example of this.)
- Don’t sell to sponsors that aren’t at least a reasonable fit with your property’s brand. Example: If you’re running an investment expo, you wouldn’t sell major sponsorship to a payday loan company.

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Your first point of contact should be the brand manager, or in a smaller company, the marketing manager or general manager. If they refer you to the sponsorship manager, an agency, or an online form, they're 99.9% sure to be telling you "no", they just don't want to do it themselves.

- Be prepared to end a sponsorship if the sponsor is mired in controversy that your fans just can't abide. Example: Your art gallery is sponsored by an investment bank that gets caught for rampant insider trading.
- Access to, or participation in, audience research.
- Opportunities to network with other sponsors.
- Assistance with developing leverage plans. If you know how to do it – and you should – offer to go in-house and facilitate a brainstorm.
- Sponsor education and leverage-development workshops (I do a LOT of these)

### Approach the Right Person

Most brand managers have the budget and authority to say "yes" to sponsorship. Most sponsorship managers don't, and when it comes to new offers, they're primarily gatekeepers. Avoid them.

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### Get Smart About Servicing

Servicing is what happens after the deal is done, and will be critical to securing a renewal at the end of the contract. It's also infinitely easier and cheaper to service a sponsor well than to sell a new sponsorship.

This isn't just about delivering the benefits as promised, which should really go without saying. It's largely about adding value to the relationship, which could include providing:

- Added-value benefits periodically through the sponsorship.
- Short, timely reports on the state of the sponsorship and what you've delivered, replacing those long, fluff-filled annual reports that everyone hates (including sponsors).

All of this is work and there is a modest cost involved – a good budget is 10% of the gross fee – but will reap you huge rewards in easier and bigger renewals, as well as referrals to other potential sponsors.

### Need More Information?

All of this and much more is included in *The Sponsorship Seeker's Toolkit 4th Edition*. Click here to purchase a copy. You'll also find a wealth of information on [PowerSponsorship.com](http://PowerSponsorship.com)

**Kim Skildum-Reid** is one of the sponsorship industry's most influential thought leaders. She has a blue chip list of consulting and training clients spanning six continents, is author of global industry bestsellers, *The Sponsorship Seeker's Toolkit* and *The Corporate Sponsorship Toolkit*, and commentates to major business media around the world. She is the brains behind industry hub, [PowerSponsorship.com](http://PowerSponsorship.com), and offers sponsorship consulting, training, speaking, and coaching.