



How Do SPONSORS EVALUATE Sponsorship Proposals

By Kim Skildum-Reid

Proposal evaluation comes down to two major factors: What you offer; and who you submit it to. These are the factors that will tell a sponsor whether what you're offering is right for them, whether you'll be easy to work with, and whether you have the skills and approach that will allow today's modern sponsors to make the most of what you're offering.

In this article, I'm going to address both of these critical factors.

YOUR PROPOSAL

Both the structure and content of your proposal will tell a sponsor a lot about whether, and to what degree, your offer is worth consideration. Most sponsors will evaluate a sponsorship proposal on these factors, in roughly this order, starting with the deal-breakers, progressing through some red flags, and then onto the proposal aspects that they love to see, and which will really get a sponsor's attention.

Is It Actually a Proposal?

If you're thinking that any request for sponsorship is a proposal, you're wrong. The lion's share of requests for sponsorship received by sponsors falls into one of these two categories:

- Letter of request – Literally, a letter requesting money, sometimes offering a few benefits in return, but often not.
- Prospectus – A brochure or other generic document, providing a laundry list of sponsorship opportunities, usually with set benefits packages and prices.

A sponsor is looking for a proposal that makes a complete business case – something that they can use to sell the opportunity internally. Neither of these fits that bill.

Is the Entire Premise Untenable?

From requests to sponsor someone's dream wedding or gap year, to requests to fund someone's idea for a "totally amazing, never before seen event concept", some approaches are just ridiculous on their face.

No sponsor is paying for your wedding, your dream trip, or anything similar. No sponsor is going to pay you to develop an idea. They are looking for fully-formed, leverageable marketing platforms, not undeveloped concepts with overdeveloped hype. And if you're looking for sponsorship, you'd better have significant skin in the game. Sponsors aren't about to bear the financial risk for your concept.

Is the Offer Structured as Gold-Silver-Bronze (or Similar)?

Once a sponsor has determined that what you've provided at least looks like a proposal, and that the basic premise seems sound, they'll look at the back pages. If what they find is set packages, in some gold-silver-bronze-style hierarchy, that's a huge red flag.

This is one of the fastest ways a sponsor can tell if you've done your homework, understand their brand, and created something custom for them, because if you'd done any of those things, the back page of your proposal wouldn't be gold-silver-bronze. It will also tell them that you lack sophistication, which will make it more difficult for them to collaborate with you for a good result.

While they're at the back of your proposal, they probably will look at the price, as well. Unless it is clearly crazy money, they'll probably reserve judgement on whether it's worth what you're pitching until they've seen more of the proposal.

Has the Rightsholder Thought Laterally About the Benefits Offered?

Still at the back of the proposal, they'll have a look at the benefits you've offered. They're looking for some creativity and strategic thinking. If you've loaded up the offer with hygiene benefits, and not much else, you're not giving them very much to work with. Gold-silver-bronze-type offers are virtually always made up of hygiene benefits.

What are hygiene benefits?

- Logos and/or mentions
- Tickets
- Hospitality
- Official designation
- Display or activation space, or speaking spot (as applicable)

There will certainly be some of these benefits in any sponsorship proposal, but if you're anchoring the offer on them, you've commoditised yourself and showcased a big lack of sophistication. For a huge list of benefit options, download and customise my "Generic Inventory".

Is It a Search-and-Replace Job?

Rightsholders seem to think they can do a search-and-replace proposal and sponsors won't know, but they do. Even if you do some light customisation by brand category – eg, your proposal for airlines is somewhat different than your proposal for banks – sponsors will be able to pick it.

Not all airlines need or want the same thing. Not all banks have the same brand proposition. Not all soft drinks target the same market segments. If you do your homework, those differences will be apparent, and your understanding of every, unique brand will form the backbone of your offer.

Is It Full of Bad Language?

No, not swear words... although that would also be counterproductive. I'm talking about terminology that gives away how you really see sponsorship.

First, there's donation language, such as...

- Support
- Assist
- Help
- Underwrite the cost of...
- Donate a prize worth...

Using terminology like this indicates to a sponsor that you see it as free money – a donation with a few benefits in return – and that it should be provided because you're deserving, not a commercial relationship that a sponsor will need to use to achieve brand and business objectives.

And as for donating a prize, hear this loud and clear: If they provide you with a prize, the marketing department will need to pay sales for it. It goes out of one budget and into another. It's not free to them, so don't act like it is.

And then there's the closely-related infrastructure language...

- So we can buy...
- So we can build...
- Capital project

This is basically telling a sponsor that you need something, and you want them to buy it for you. But sponsors aren't interested in paying for your new building or facility or training gear or other hard costs. You need to find real value and build a business case, then what you do with the money is up to you.

Has the Rightsholder Done Their Homework?

As mentioned in the search-and-replace point, above, not all sponsors need the same thing – not even in the same category – so, when a sponsor reviews a proposal that demonstrates no understanding of their brand, markets, objectives, or priorities, they'll see you as either lacking sophistication or lazy, and that's clearly not good.

On the other hand, this is a place where rightsholders can really shine. A rightsholder that demonstrates that they've

spent some time researching the brand will put themselves head and shoulders above probably 90% or more of the approaches a sponsor gets. Demonstrating some insight that goes deeper than just the current ad campaign will get you even more points on the board, so search for news, look at their media room and other sponsorships, look at what their brand does overseas, and understand their entire portfolio of brands. You never know what gems of insight you'll find.

How Much of the Proposal is About the Sponsor's Brand, Markets, and Objectives?

Doing that homework is great, but if a sponsor doesn't see any evidence of it until they've slogged through fourteen pages about how great your property is, they probably won't see it at all.

The proposal isn't about you, it's about the sponsor and their target market. Your role in that is to provide the meaning and authenticity that helps them to connect with and deepen their relationships with those markets. That role – the conduit – is the role you need to take in your proposal, so provide as much info about your property as you need to for context, then concentrate on the relationship between the sponsor and the fans.

Has the rightsholder included creative ideas for how the sponsor can leverage the sponsorship?

Leverage is what a sponsor does with a sponsorship; the activities they undertake that turn the opportunity you're selling them into the results they need. By providing this, you're closing the loop for the sponsor. The proposal turns from this:

Info about the property → Context → Benefits → Price

To this:

Info about the property → Context → How the sponsor can use the opportunity to achieve its objectives → Benefits → Price

If you include strong leverage ideas – ideas that showcase your understanding of their brand and objectives, ideas that work over time and geographies – you are demonstrating a very high degree of sophistication. Even if you miss with an idea or two, you've shortened your odds for getting to the next step considerably, at which point you can work with the sponsor on some better ideas.

Has the Rightsholder Considered Non-attendees?

Rightsholders spend months or years living and breathing whatever event or season or program that they're trying to deliver, and this can breed a bit of myopia on sponsorship. Just because you need to focus so hard on the people that actually show up, doesn't mean that these are the only, or even the most important, people to the sponsor.

They're going to be looking for some evidence that you understand that, and have included non-attendees in your outline of target markets, and especially in the leverage ideas you provide. These non-attendees can include:

- Remote fans – Literally, fans who aren't on-site
- Fans of the larger themes of the property
- Sponsor customers and potential customers
- Sponsor staff
- Intermediary markets (retailers, brokers, resellers, dealers, etc.)

Again, just because some of these markets may not matter to you, the rightsholder, that doesn't mean they're not critically important to the sponsor.

Does It Make a Business Case?

This is a critical question, and one that can trip up a rightsholder that has done virtually everything else right.

The primary role of a sponsorship proposal isn't to sell to your contact, but for your contact to sell it internally. For this reason, it needs to make an airtight business case, and that business case needs to be laid out in a sensible way, building from one section to the next. If you follow a Hollywood-style story arc with your proposal, the sponsor will get all of the information they need, in a format that's easy to sell internally.

For more on how to structure a sponsorship proposal, watch my tutorial, "Sponsorship Proposal Basics in About 15 Minutes". For everything you need to know about creating an offer and formalising it into a proposal, including a sponsorship proposal template, get a copy of *The Sponsorship Seeker's Toolkit 4th Edition*.

THE RECEIVER

Who you send it to is almost as important as the content of your proposal, and can have a huge bearing on the process and eventual success of your offer.

Sponsorship Manager

You send sponsorship proposals to the sponsorship manager, right?? Wrong. A large portion of most sponsorship managers' jobs is gatekeeping. That is, keeping you and your proposal away from anyone who makes real decisions.

The proposal isn't about you, it's about the sponsor and their target market. Your role in that is to provide the meaning and authenticity that helps them to connect with and deepen their relationships with those markets.

This is not a hard-and-fast rule, by any means, but sending a proposal to a sponsor's agency is basically akin to sending it down a black hole. You're basically volunteering to put a third party between you and the decision-maker...

If you send your proposal to a sponsorship manager, chances are, it will land in a real or virtual pile with hundreds of other sponsorship proposals. Maybe the sponsorship manager will get to it, maybe not for months, and maybe not at all. And calling to follow up is, as you are probably well aware, about as effective as if you followed up by throwing messages in bottles into the sea.

If they do review it, it will likely be a very cursory examination, simply because they have so many others to review. Even if you send in a fabulous proposal, the chances of a sponsorship manager putting ample time into the offer to see its greatness is slim. Frankly, there is every chance they won't get to it until after it's too late for you.

Brand Manager

The brand manager makes the decisions 99% of the time, so that is really your best option for a strong proposal. They are not nearly as inundated as the sponsorship manager and tend to be turned on by great ideas. But remember, it's not the great idea you have for your event (or whatever) that turns them on, it's the great ideas you provide them for how their brand can use the sponsorship to change people's perceptions and behaviours.

If they're interested, they will then shop the proposal around to colleagues. Sponsorship works best – and leverage is much lower cost – when it is integrated across a lot of existing activities, but that requires buy in from their online team, sales, HR, retention, and any number of other departments and business units. They will want to see interest in using the sponsorship from at least a couple of other stakeholders before investing in anything significant.

This process can take a bit of time, so you need to be patient. A good idea is to

say something in your covering letter like, "I understand you may want to discuss this with colleagues or other business units. Please let me know if there is any additional information you need or if you/they have any questions."

CEO

Unless it is a pet project, CEOs of larger companies rarely get involved with sponsorship. They don't want to be seen being mean to people by saying "no", either, so they usually flick the proposal to the sponsorship manager and it goes onto the pile somewhere with the rest of the once-in-a-lifetime opportunities.

Agency

This is not a hard-and-fast rule, by any means, but sending a proposal to a sponsor's agency is basically akin to sending it down a black hole. You're basically volunteering to put a third party between you and the decision-maker, and they often put themselves in the position of gatekeeper, whether they've been asked to do that by the client or not. (Yes, I know there will be exceptions, but this is the rule.)

Sponsorship Submission Form

I cannot count the ways that I hate these things. Seriously, they represent the worst of sponsorship and should be avoided at all costs.

Basically, it's an automated gatekeeper. It gives you no room to showcase your creative leverage ideas. Instead, it spits out an Excel worksheet with whatever you've entered for how many logos, tickets, hospitality, and what official designation you're offering. In other words, they're designed for old school, least-common-denominator, commodity sponsorships.

That's not the kind of proposals you create, so hear me when I tell you this:

Ignore the forms. Do your homework. Go to the brand manager. If the brand manager refers you to the form, they've just told you no. Game over.

The Upshot

If you want the cleanest, fastest route through the proposal evaluation process, your best option is definitely:

- Do your homework
- Customise the proposal, including creative leverage ideas specific to the sponsor's brand
- Submit the proposal to the brand manager.

Even if you do this perfectly, you will hear "no" more than you hear "yes". The good news is that, even if it's a "no", if you do this process well, they will always be happy to hear from you on another project in the future.

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