



# DIARY OF A SPONSORSHIP LOSER

By Kim Skildum-Reid

I hear a lot of stories from sponsorship seekers. Stories filled with frustration, anguish, and sheer desperation. Most of the time, all of that could have been avoided, if they made some different choices along the way. This is a story – and some related advice – inspired by the emails I've received from the industry.

### Day 1

Woo-hoo, got the permit and the new festival is on!

I know seven months isn't a lot of time to plan and run a community festival, especially with only one paid employee (me) for now. The board says if I raise enough sponsorship, I can get some help. This is a GREAT event, so that shouldn't be a problem. Onward and upward!

### Day 10

Spent most of the last week working on the sponsorship prospectus. Googled "sponsorship prospectus" and there was tons of advice and a few templates. I'm really happy with how it turned out. There are dozens of places I can put sponsorship logos, so they'll get heaps of exposure. Plus, they can get a booth at the festival and they can donate a prize.

### What Went Wrong

The first mistake was googling "sponsorship prospectus template". Anyone who says a sponsorship prospectus is a good idea has no clue what they're doing.

Never, EVER send a sponsorship prospectus. These people aren't buying shares in an IPO, they're considering a marketing opportunity that they will need to leverage into a result. You need to write a proposal template, with a proper story arc, and then you need to customise it for every potential sponsor to make it about how your property meets their needs and is relevant to their target markets. An uncustomised prospectus doesn't achieve any of that, and is a huge red flag to potential sponsors. And don't think for a second that "customising" them by doing a search-and-replace to insert their company names all over the document will get you any further, because it won't.

And sponsorship levels – silver gets you this and gold gets you a few more of the same boring, commodity benefits? Sponsors hate them. Another huge red flag. What's a commodity benefit? Logos on things, tickets to things, some kind of hospitality, an official designation, and possibly some kind of booth.

At this point, I could list several dozen blogs that are must-reads, but it's easier if you just have a look at a couple of best-of blog roundups:

- 25+ Proposal Development Resources for Sponsorship Seekers
- 36+ Sponsorship Sales Resources for Sponsorship Seekers

Honestly, though, you might be best off getting a copy of *The Sponsorship Seeker's Toolkit 4th Edition*, which outlines the whole process of offer and proposal development, including a proper sponsorship proposal template.

### Day 13

I had to work late the last few nights to do it, but I've created a list of almost 500 big companies that would be great sponsors. A bunch of them had email addresses for submitting sponsorship requests, so that makes it easy. Maybe a third of them have online forms to submit requests, which is a little fiddly, but I can get those in over the next few evenings. I found webmaster@, customer service, and media relations emails for the rest of them. If I address those emails to the Sponsorship Manager, I'm sure they'll pass them along.

If even ten or fifteen of these come on board, we'll be swimming in revenue!

### What Went Wrong

Oh, there's so much wrong with this!

First, sponsorship is not a numbers game. Targeting twenty or thirty sponsors with super-customised offers will be far more successful than targeting hundreds with an uncustomised prospectus that's all about you and your need.

Second, the sponsorship manager is NOT who you should send any offer to. One of the primary jobs of most sponsorship managers is to be a gatekeeper. Send it to the brand manager or regional marketing manager, or for a smaller company, the marketing manager or even the GM.

Third, don't even think about submitting your offer via an online form. That's where offers go to die, as it's just automated gatekeeping.

Last, if you think a generic company email address will bother to forward your pitch anywhere, you're wrong.

### Day 21

Fitting it in with my other festival work, it's taken over a week, but I got all of the emails out and sponsorship request forms filled in. I've loaded all of the contact details into MS Access, so I can track all of our conversations. I'll start doing follow-up phone calls in a week, which will give me some time to catch up on the operational stuff.



## Day 34

Jesus, making 500 phone calls takes a bloody long time, especially when I have to go through the switchboard and then get transferred through. I tried to get the switch to give me their names and direct numbers, but I didn't get ANY of them.

And these people must be incredibly busy, because I never got to actually speak with anyone about sponsorship. I swear, I left 450 voicemails for the sponsorship manager or sponsorship department. (Sponsorship departments have their own voicemails – who knew?) A bunch of them had voice mailboxes that were already full. They must be on holidays. I'll call them back in a few days.

For the other ones, reception referred me to their ad agency for sponsorship queries. That was pretty much a wild goose chase, as most of them kept transferring me from one person to another until I just had to leave a voicemail.

Nothing left to do now but wait for the phone to ring. Bring it on!

## What Went Wrong

That phone is not going to ring. Sponsorship managers wage war on crappy sponsorship offers, and their weapon of choice is voicemail.

Because everything leading up to this was done so badly, they're not going to engage. You're just another of the hundreds or thousands of unsolicited, uncustomised, and totally awful approaches they receive every month.

## Day 50

This is crazy. Nobody has called back at all. I did another round of calls last week, but still nothing. I actually started wondering if the phone was okay. Called it from my mobile and it rang. Called the phone company and they said there hadn't been any technical issues on this exchange. I don't know what to make of this.

Actually, I have heard back from two of them – emails saying that all of their funds were currently committed. I guess that's fair, but these are companies that spend millions on sponsorship. Surely, they have enough in the budget to sponsor this awesome festival for \$25,000.

## What Went Wrong

This is the very predictable result of the approach taken to selling these sponsorships.

By the way, "All our funds are currently committed" is a total lie 99.9% of the time. They're just trying to let you down easy. If your offer was compelling enough, they'd find the money.

## Day 86

How do other events do it?? I've been persistent – god knows I've been persistent.

I've made literally thousands of phone calls, leaving thousands of voicemails. Twice, someone in sponsorship has picked up my call, but I think they thought I was someone else. One told me she'd call me back, but didn't. The other one said it took 6-8 months for them to make a decision, so I should be patient.

I have received 57 decline emails. Almost all of them say that all their funds are "currently committed". IS THIS SOME KIND OF CODE???

The board is panicking, because we need to start paying for a lot of stuff – hiring equipment, security, traffic control. The list is as long as my arm, and the money we're getting from exhibitors and City Council won't cover nearly all of it.

I asked the board for some help, because I'm getting really behind on operations. They said there's no money for more staff right now, and that I should look into getting a couple of unpaid interns. At least that's something.

## What Went Wrong

Yes, this is code. "All our funds are currently committed" is code for...

*"Your proposal was a total crap-heap, but we can't be arsed itemising all of the things that are wrong with it any more than you were arsed creating a compelling proposal for us. Now, go away."*

As for taking 6-8 months to make a decision, that is also a lie. If your offer was good enough for them to seriously consider, they would get back to you within a month or so. It just takes them 6-8 months to get around to sending the "all our funds are currently committed" emails to the rest of you.

## Day 117

The phone is my enemy. I stare at it, willing it to ring, and it doesn't. I wonder how many times I can leave follow-up voicemails without appearing unprofessional. I had a dream the other night where the phone was ringing, but I couldn't answer it. My hand went right through it, like a ghost or something.

Email isn't much better. I've received almost 200 emails declining the opportunity. You guessed it: All their funds are "currently committed".

This is so depressing. My wife is saying I'm starting to depress her! If only she knew. If I don't turn this around, I'll be lucky to even HAVE a job in four months' time.

If there was a silver lining, it would be that not dealing with sponsors has given me more time to concentrate on operational stuff. Unfortunately, that's started being largely about putting off payments and scaling back costs.

At least the interns are proving helpful.

## What Went Wrong

Mate, you appeared unprofessional the moment you clicked "send" on

the prospectus email. As for following up, there is a point at which you will appear not only unprofessional, but desperate. As if your approach to sponsorship putting your chances of success near zero weren't bad enough, any air of desperation will make those odds even longer.

For more on this, see "How Long Should You Follow Up on a Sponsorship Proposal?"

## Day 134

Spend all weekend reading a sales book my wife had lying around, and I'm REVITALISED! Sales is all about networking, it says, so network I'm going to do!

## Day 140

Well, that didn't work.

I blew a whole day connecting with second- and third-degree connections on LinkedIn. I was super-proactive: As soon as someone connected with me, I messaged them my pitch and a link to the sponsorship prospectus. 170 of them, and not one positive response. 64 of them disconnected without responding at all. The ones that did respond weren't very nice, and a lot of them disconnected as well. Seven people reported me for spamming and I got a nasty email from LinkedIn.

I didn't think it was possible, but LinkedIn groups was even worse. I joined several sponsorship groups and posted my pitch and link there, as well. The posts were reported to admins several times and I was removed from one group that called itself "a spam-free zone". The only responses I got were people trying to pitch ME for tent hire, event management software, and other crap I don't need.

This is a good event – why can't people see that?!

## What Went Wrong

LinkedIn is a great way to find out who might be the right contact to receive your offer. Actually pitching them out of the blue via LinkedIn is a very bad idea, however.

Sponsorship-oriented LinkedIn groups tend to have few sponsors, for the specific reason that there is so much spam. Some groups have realised how much sponsorship spam is hurting them and have a very low tolerance for it.

Either way, your pitch falls into the category of "crap I don't need" and pitching a bunch of strangers on LinkedIn is not going to get you anything but scorn.

## Day 145

Agencies!! I'll target sponsorship consultants and agencies and get them to pitch the event to their clients! One agency will have a bunch of clients, so it will be super-efficient. Why didn't I think of this before??

Now that I've got a couple of interns around, they can do the research and send out the prospecting note with the link. If they reach out to a few hundred, that could mean the event will reach a few thousand potential sponsors.

#### Day 148

Agency people are just rude. No interest at all, and several of them sent snotty messages like I am somehow a pain in THEIR arse.

One consultant I contacted through her company Facebook page responded with, "Spamming won't get you sponsorship". When I replied that it wasn't spam, she replied, "Any message addressed to 'To whom it may concern' is spam", and blocked me!

#### What Went Wrong

Don't pitch agencies and consultants. Their clients pay them for objective, expert advice. They're not going to abuse that relationship by pitching a crap proposal from a total stranger.

For more on this, see *"5 Reasons You Shouldn't Send Your Sponsorship Proposal to Consultants."*

PS, that consultant that replied, "Spamming won't get you sponsorship", was me.

#### Day 150

Still smarting from the arse-kicking I got at the board meeting yesterday. They think this sponsorship thing is EASY! I wish they could spend just one day in my shoes.

At least we've got a plan. I'm going to find a broker to sell sponsorship to the big corporates on commission, while I concentrate on getting sponsorship from local businesses.

#### Day 163

I've now done a new prospectus for local businesses, asking them to give back to the community. The top level is \$5000 and the bottom is \$500. The City Council has agreed to put a notice in their next e-newsletter to local businesses in a couple of weeks, and we're going to email the prospectus to every business on the Chamber of Commerce website.

God, I hope this works.

#### What Went Wrong

I've already harped on enough about the folly of a prospectus and sending uncustomised offers to a big, unqualified list, but there are a couple of other red flags here.

The idea that companies will invest marketing money to "give back to the community" doesn't work, even at the local level. If they want to give altruistically, they'll do a donation to a local charity or community organisation,

not back your festival. Even at the local, SME level, you still need to prove that this will work for them against their objectives.

And although the temptation to back-fill your sponsorship hole with tiny investments from local businesses may seem like a good Plan B, even if you are successful at selling some of these – and you probably will sell some – you'll end up with a sponsorship portfolio full of what's referred to as "rats-and-mice" sponsorships. They'll bring in tiny amounts of money, but every one of them will be at least as needy and demanding as a big sponsor would have been. The time and effort you put in, and the benefits you need to provide, will probably outstrip every dollar they spend with you.

If you're going to go to local businesses, the same rules apply as for big corporations. Sell with lots of lead-time, customise the offers, go to businesses that are sizeable enough that they can achieve significant results from a significant sponsorship, and price it accordingly.

#### Day 165

If nothing else, the interns are good at web research. They found and emailed 140 sponsorship brokers. Most of them, we haven't heard back from. The ones we have said that a) the festival is way too small for it to be worth their while to broker; and b) the timeframe is way too short. Like I don't know that.

I'll do another round of follow-up calls to sponsors tomorrow. I'll offer them a huge discount. There's got to be someone out there who rewards persistence.

#### What Went Wrong

The timeframe being too short has nothing to do with you running out of time and cash, it has to do with the sponsor's requirements. You need to be in the market and selling far enough out from your event/launch/season/etc. that the sponsor can make a decision, plan their leverage activities (often across several departments), and then implement those leverage activities BEFORE it starts.

What's leverage, you ask? Sponsors don't get results from the benefits you're selling them. They get results from what they do with those benefits. Are you a fan of a sports team? Look at what the sponsors do: Social media, content creation, sales promotions, media promotions, special edition products, on-site events and activities at the stadium or arena, and so, so, so much more.

That's all leverage, and it takes months upon months to plan and set up. Add onto that the time it can take for them to assess a proposal and

say "yes", and you should be in the marketplace with customised proposals at least six to eight months before launch, and the more time the better.

So, not only is the timeframe too short for a broker to be interested, it's too short to be in the marketplace and trying to sell direct. And offering the same benefits at fire-sale pricing won't get you the sale, it will just make you appear more desperate.

#### Day 190

It's three weeks until the event and I've run out of time. I'm working a hundred hours a week just trying to ensure the festival happens. I can't make any more calls.

Council pulled a few strings and got a few local businesses on board, for a total sponsorship income of \$12,400. A local car dealership offered \$5500 for naming rights, but Council nixed it. It was "inappropriate", they said. They had to bail us out financially, and said that if anyone should get naming rights, it should be them. I can't really argue. Neither could the board, so Council is now naming rights sponsor.

The writing's on the wall for me, I think. Sponsorship was critical to making the festival happen, and despite all of my best efforts, I couldn't do it. Big companies just aren't into community festivals, I guess. As soon as the event is over, I'll need to look for another job – one with no sponsorship.

#### What Went Wrong

Big sponsors invest in properties at all levels, right down to local, as long as they are relevant to their target markets.

This is a new event. Making sponsorship a large part of the required revenue to run it was a big mistake. Even if you do everything right, sponsors will tend to gravitate toward more established properties. There are clearly exceptions, and some new events have done very well with sponsorship, but that should be considered an enormous bonus, not a requirement for making your event happen. Budget low, do it right, and consider yourself lucky to exceed your target in year one.

Stay tuned to the next issue of "ie" magazine where Kim will share the "Top Ten Tips for Sponsorship Seekers."

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