



Sponsorship Matterings:

From Logos & Noise to Emotional Experiences

★ LETTERBIM



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Introduction

Did you feel the Earth move?

If not, buckle up, because there's another rumble coming. A seismic shift is unfolding around conference and trade show sponsorships and even more so around exhibits. An increasing number of anchor exhibitors are scaling back their booth footprints. Some are shifting their gaze to sponsorships. Others are taking matters into their own hands and embracing Ambush Marketing around the fringes of your event.



Courtesy of CoreNet Global Summit

For opportunistic event organizers, this new imperative can breed richer attendee and sponsor experiences and, in turn, grow stronger and more sustainable revenue streams. For others still clinging to yesterday's booth and logo-heavy business model, there will be tough times ahead.

The New Manifesto for Sponsorships

Sponsorships featuring logos, eyeballs and impressions don't carry the same value they once did. Actually, these offerings shouldn't even be called sponsorships. They're promotional opportunities.

Introduction

At the same time, sponsorship buyers are becoming more sophisticated about the dollars they invest and how they leverage emotional marketing. They're also refining their palate to deliver more intimate customer and prospect experiences including hosting their own exclusive events.

Not too long ago, conference sponsorship buyers appreciated the opportunity to step up and support their industry. That sentiment is waning in today's more fragile and competitive marketplace. Industry goodwill is still appreciated, but when your sponsorship contact seeks budget approval for the next round, they're often hearing new questions, like: "What are we getting out of this sponsorship? How will this investment help us better penetrate this target market? How will it help us forge stronger ties to the clients we serve?"

Those who step up to deliver more meaningful benefits, grounded in attendee mattering, will not only survive, but thrive.

Conference and trade show organizers now find themselves immersed in a prove-it-or-lose-it sponsorship environment. Those who fall short on proof of performance will churn through sponsors, as they watch margins decline. Those who step up to deliver more meaningful benefits, grounded in attendee mattering will not only survive, but thrive. We know you're a Thriver and this eBook is written for you.

Why a Change in Sponsorship Strategy is Urgent

It's been years since the last big disruption in 2008. That perfect storm when the economy skidded and technology went into overdrive. Soon after this disruption, travel and professional development budgets were slashed, while new and more affordable digital marketing, thought leadership and networking channels became mainstream.

Though this disruption initially caused some anxiety for our industry, ultimately cooler (and wiser) heads prevailed. While digital was once perceived as a threat to face-to-face events, they actually grew appetites that could only be satisfied at live conferences and shows.

With our industry now back on solid footing, new and reimagined sponsorship models can improve your revenue diversification and attendee value proposition. Your success is highly dependent on leadership support, their involvement in the sales process and risk tolerance.

After analyzing dozens of sponsorship programs, we've identified four key attributes that exist in the most successful event-based sponsorship models:

1. Fewer investors, but bigger investments
2. Benefits beyond eyeballs and logos
3. Activation plans that span 90 days plus
4. If the attendee doesn't win, nobody wins



Courtesy of CoreNet Global Summit

Yet for those longing for substantial growth for the sponsorship revenue-line, there's one more critical plan element that must be mastered.

Premium Sponsorships Require Door-Openers

Five- or six-figure sponsorship deals rarely come when you're dialing for dollars or blasting out email prospectuses. They also almost never closed solely due to a sales rep's diligence or keen persuasion skills.

When an organization steps up to invest at this level, it's almost always the result of someone high up in your organization making introductions and being involved in the initial discovery conversations with a decision maker.

Five- or six-figure sponsorship deals rarely come when you're dialing for dollars or blasting out email prospectuses.

That's right. In order to grow the sponsorship revenue line, you must match power with power. On the sponsor side, you need to get to the budget maker, not the spender. They will likely have an ego that needs to be stroked. For best results, feed that ego by giving them a seat at the table with your leadership. Big investments need to be supported by big ideas. Anything less and incremental revenue growth and high sponsor churn are the best you can hope for.

Outfoxing the Sly Ambush Marketers

Ambush Marketing “*is a marketing strategy where scammers associate themselves with, and therefore capitalize on, a particular event without paying for the privilege*” (paraphrased from Wikipedia). Chief among these threats is **outboarding** (when companies bypass exhibiting or sponsoring and set up shop on the fringe of your event) and **suitcasing** (when non-exhibiting sellers work the aisles or hallways). Adding fuel to the fire, some are choosing not to register and instead, they’re hanging out in public spaces, scheduling meet-ups with your badged attendees.



Courtesy of Ballertainment

You may recall a stunning ambush marketing play at the 2012 London Olympics. Beats by Dr. Dre designed custom headphones in national colors and distributed these to athletes. They weren’t official Olympic sponsors, yet television coverage captured many Olympic athletes proudly sporting these branded headphones. Mission accomplished.

A smart way to combat ambush marketing plays would be to diffuse, but don’t overreach. While you can prohibit unauthorized use of branding, you can’t prevent people from meeting in places beyond your control. Overstep these boundaries and you’ll come across like Big Brother. [This article](#) outlines four ways to diffuse ambushers and even convince a few to take the high road.

More importantly, if ambush marketing is a growing problem for your event, there's likely something more serious going on. From the dozens of conferences we've reviewed, the root cause is often quality/loyalty of attendance and the attendee value proposition for your core offerings.

Successful Ambushers Lure Others Away

A "Top 150" trade show enjoyed years of sponsorship success with a hat swap. This activity drew raves from attendees and became one of the most talked about experiences. Pricing was increased accordingly.

Then one year, the sponsor decided to do it on their own at a nearby venue. Attendees flocked to this ambush and in time, so did a few exhibitors.

Moral of the story: Do everything within your power to deliver unmatched value to premium sponsors. Find ways to extend the sponsorship value runway beyond the show. Sponsors that deliver high-mattering experiences are magnets for countless others.

Smaller, but More Agile Participation

After years of record show attendance, many premium conferences and trade shows have hit a glass ceiling or are in decline. Firms that once sent many staff members to the annual industry event are now sending smaller squads to work the booth, attend the conference and kick tires on the show floor.

Smart organizers have reacted by focusing on quality over quantity and attracting key attendee segments and individuals. VIP experiences, hosted buyer models and group packaging are some of the primary attendance acquisition tactics that are being adopted to deliver the high quality attendees that sponsors and exhibitors desire to see most.

A Vastly Improved and More Achievable Outcome Is Within Our Grasp

Conference and trade show attendees don't remember logos splashed across slides, escalators and every last bit of convention center real estate. They're also not interested in a flood of commercials before speakers take the stage. That kind of interruption advertising seriously compromises trust with the audience you worked so hard to earn.



Courtesy of CAMEX

Strategic event sponsorship is now a battle for delivering extraordinary experiences and industry advocacy. It's a bold, persistent and epic pursuit to help brands emotionally connect with participants and to positively impact their learning, networking, and event experiences.

Sponsorship needs to evolve to deliver attendee mattering. This means the more you can provide a win for the attendee, the more likely the sponsor will also be rewarded. To make this shift, high value sponsorship opportunities will be aligned with one or more of these categories:

1. Thought Leadership
2. Attendee Experiences
3. Exclusive VIP Experiences

Sponsorships Built on Attendee Mattering

Let's begin with a tough truth:

Many sponsorships don't matter to attendees.

- Will that sponsor logo on the hotel key card impact a future purchase decision?
- Does anyone pay much attention to inserts stuffed in conference bags?
- Are attendees wishing for a longer sponsor pitch at your Opening General Session?

These and other sponsorship misfires happen regularly at conferences and trade shows. Though well intended, conference organizers shine far too much light on logo noise and promotions, obscuring more valuable sponsorships that are better poised to drive revenue growth, attendee engagement, differentiation and value to the sponsor. Their investment can and should be spent more wisely.

Matting: To be of importance or consequence.

But who determines what's important? You serve many masters, but there's one that ranks above all others...



Courtesy of FMI Connect

CHAPTER 2

Materring Begins and Ends with Your Attendees

Without attendees, there is no conference or trade show. Attendees are the lifeblood of any event ecosystem. Attendees are the primary arbiters who determine what's important and what's not. And when you deliver experiences that matter to your attendees, everybody wins!



Courtesy of CAMEX

Sponsorships built from the attendee up create win/win/win collectable experiences.

- Wins for your attendees (target market), as you improve their experience.
- Wins for your sponsors, as you connect them and advance their positioning with their target market.
- Wins for your organization, as the conference revenue diversification and value improves.

(Hat tip to [Kim Skildum-Reid](#) who developed the concept of the triple win and inspired many of the recommendations that we've applied to the conference and trade show industry.)

CHAPTER 2

Skildum-Reid says, “It’s no longer...

If you love the event, you should love our brand or worse pay attention to us (and our logos)!”

“Instead it’s... We know you love this event – we love it too! – And we’ve thought of a few ways to make it even better for you.”



Yet this cascade of wins stops abruptly if the first tier - the attendee win - isn’t satisfied. Before we explore the smarter route to win/win/win experiences, let’s start with the “What Not To Do” list.

Attendees don’t win when...

- every touch point is a sales pitch.
- they’re overwhelmed by sponsorship email promotions.
- networking is haphazard, forced or forgotten.
- keynotes kick off with 10+ minutes of sponsor promotions.
- education is pay to play, laced with sponsor product peddling.
- the sponsored freebies are meaningless (e.g., key cards, bus wraps, flyers, etc.).
- valued freebies are heavily promoted, but unavailable once the attendee arrives.

CHAPTER 2

Three filters to ensure the Attendee Win & attain premium pricing:



Courtesy of Kalahari Resort

1. CHOICE

The attendee must have the opportunity to opt-in or opt-out. Sponsorships must never be forced on them. The faster/easier the opt in, the greater the participation.

2. ACTIVATION

This is what the attendee does or feels while engaging with the sponsorship.

- a. Consume or appreciate it.
- b. Take it home, share or apply it.
- c. It provides passion or alignment with their values.

Activation is best realized when sponsors help make the best conference moments better – or help make the worst moments more tolerable.

3. MATTERING

This is what the attendee gets from the sponsorship.

- a. Entertained, engaged or educated
- b. Surprised or something unexpected
- c. Helped personally and/or professionally
- d. Sense of feeling special
- e. Utility – Food & beverage, special offers, convenience
- f. Connexity – (community + connections)

Mattering multiplies when appreciation is high, without expectation of reciprocity.

Bottom-line: Best-in-class sponsorships deliver experiences that matter highly to attendees.

The more the mattering, the more you'll be able to charge for the sponsorship. If you can't confidently state that about every item on your sponsorship menu, then change is in order.

Does Your Sponsorship Menu Need to Go On a Diet?

If 35% or more of your sponsorship inventory isn't selling, that's a clear sign it's time to trim the fat. Ditto if you're churning through sponsors. If at least 75% of your sponsorship revenue is not renewing, that's a leading indicator that your sponsorship value prop is crumbling.



Before you start designing new sponsorships that matter to attendees, take a closer look at your current inventory. For each item, ask yourself:

Does this sponsorship help improve the attendee experience?

To what degree does it optimize the three filters of Choice, Activation and Mattering?

- If you can confidently answer “Yes” to these questions, great – carry on.
- If your answer is “No,” 86 it to make room for something better.
- If you're uncertain, consider bundling it with other items that matter.

Granted, these are tough decisions to make. And you might even have a few sponsorships that fail this litmus test, but they're still selling. As sponsor sophistication grows, the shelf life of these investments is at risk. Wherever possible, smart organizers will help guide their investors to properties that deliver better results.

The Paradox of Choice

A confused buyer does not buy.
[Jeff Gitomer](#)

When sponsorship buyers encounter choice overload, their attention drifts. Some retreat and never make a decision.

Many sponsorship prospectuses include 30 or more *à la carte* items and four or more bundled packages. Trimming back your sponsorship menu will not only positively impact mattering. It will help speed up decisions and reduce cost of sales.

One More Important Caveat

If your sponsorship and/or exhibit offerings aren't growing, you often have a bigger problem...attendance. Nearly every unhealthy program we've analyzed can make incremental improvements to move the revenue needle, but if the target audience doesn't have enough juice and are not loyal to your conference or show, change efforts will fall flat.

Mattering Mojo Buckets

Which conference experiences matter most to today's conference audiences? Consider these three experiential buckets, each well suited to get a meaningful boost from sponsorships:

1. Thought Leadership
2. Attendee Experiences
3. Exclusive VIP Experiences

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- 1. Thought Leadership/Education** – Sophisticated sponsors and exhibitors are embracing content marketing. As defined by the [Content Marketing Institute](#), content marketing is *“non-interruption marketing. Instead of pitching your products and services, you are delivering information that makes your buyer more intelligent...they ultimately reward us with their business and loyalty.”* In essence, it’s a mindset shift – from Push to Pull marketing.

It’s about helping over selling. As it applies to events, the sponsor either delivers or sponsors the thought leadership. Instead of selling from the podium, the speaker embeds the sponsor as someone who cares for and understands the profession.



Courtesy of SOLAR Power International

Thought leadership examples: keynote or luncheon speakers, whitepapers, webinars, awards, education tracks or sessions, show floor theaters, video interviews, industry research, seminars, workshops, etc. Thought leadership is not pay to play.

According to the [B2B Content Marketing 2015 Benchmarks, Budgets & Trends](#) study, video is commanding a larger slice (76%) of the B2B content marketing pie. Conferences and trade shows are fertile ground for capturing video that matters highly to attendees *and* sponsors.

CHAPTER 2

- 2. Attendee Experiences** – Take a moment to look at your event through the lens of your target market attendees. They're navigating a new city, a new venue, and a hectic conference and trade show filled with options. They're away from the creature comforts they enjoy at home, too. They're counting on you (and your sponsors) to help make their conference experiences better and more memorable.



Courtesy of American Culinary Federation (ACF)

At the top of their wish list? Anything that delivers comfort, joy, nourishment, fun, community, connections, direction, shortcuts or rescues them from the inevitable snags that come with business travel. Attendees are riding an emotional rollercoaster as they move about your event, with a mix of high energy, dazzling moments and quiet pauses. The more you can position sponsors as helpful and thoughtful experience stewards, the more they will matter and be appreciated by your target audience.

Attendee Experience examples: Attendee Mobile App, WiFi, charging stations, networking experiences, wayfinding kiosks, lounges, photo booths, maps... plus F&B, prizes, samples, keepsakes, unique activities and entertainment.

- 3. Exclusive/VIP Experiences** – Scarcity and exclusivity take mattering to new heights. Inviting targeted groups to a special gathering that’s not open to everyone makes them feel special, even privileged. Add a few VIP experiences to your agenda and watch mattering and sponsor ROI soar.

VIP Experience examples: Leadership reception or dinner, VIP lounge, VIP gathering or back-stage pass to meet/photo opportunity with guest speaker or celebrity.



Courtesy of BIO International Convention

Much like a restaurant will categorize appetizers, entrees, sides and desserts, sponsorship seekers should also organize their menu around the Attendee Experience, Thought Leadership and VIP Experience categories. Making this change will immediately help potential sponsors align your offerings with their marketing objectives.

Scarcity and exclusivity take mattering to new heights.

“Easy Sell” Categories Could Be Hurting You More Than You Realize

There’s one more sponsorship menu bucket and unfortunately, it’s where most sponsorships currently fall: **Promotional Opportunities**.

The Promotional Opportunities bucket would include aisle signs, website banners, hotel key cards, badge lanyards, tote bags, pens, bag inserts, room drops, shuttle bus wraps, pre- or post-conference email blasts, registration confirmation emails, and so on.

Another apt name: The Low-to-No Mattering bucket.

Are these “easy sales” helping to improve your long-term revenue picture?

Typically, promotional opportunities are viewed by your sales teams as easier to sell, but attendees fail to notice or care, so there’s lots of churn. The cost to acquire new sponsors is steep and getting steeper. Are these “easy sells” helping to improve your long-term revenue picture? Perhaps it’s time to reallocate a portion of that sales time to secure sponsorships with more staying power?

While some promotional items are necessary, if only to reduce hard dollar costs, many fail to deliver meaningful value. Path forward, you might consider bundling some promotional opportunities with premium packages available only to your largest investors.

The exception to this trim back promo rule? Maintaining a short list of low cost booth add-ons opens the door for onboarding new sponsors. We like to call this the “[would you like fries with that booth?](#)” sale. These work best when your exhibitors are given opportunities to optimize their exposure with an online booth listing, show specials and new product showcases. With attendees wielding smart phones and tablets as they navigate your event, featured listings and increased visibility on your mobile app and event microsite deliver an appreciable boost in booth traffic, plus it improves the attendee experience. Give ‘em what they crave and coach exhibitors on best ways to leverage this added exposure.



Courtesy of ACF; Kyle Perler, Chuck Fazio Photography

Promotion and Advertising Does Not Make an Emotional Connection

When most of your sponsor benefits are about placement and impressions, you’re selling advertising, not sponsorship. Online channels are much more capable of measuring the ROI of that spend. Face-to-face sponsor investments must make the brand feel like a market leader, have high engagement with elite existing customers (and others like them) and generally advance enterprise deals. Falling short of these makes it an unsustainable donation.

Driving Change with Current Investors

With attendee mattering as your primary sponsorship strategy lens, it's time to think like Nike and "Just Do It." You'll need to get others onboard – your leadership, staff, volunteers, etc. Attendee mattering isn't a once-in-awhile pursuit. For best results, attendee mattering must be intentionally threaded across the entire event experience, with you and your sponsors serving as chief attendee experience stewards.

Hence, this change initiative will require buy-in from your current investors.

Viewing Sponsors Through a New Lens

You'll notice the title for this chapter includes the word **Investor**. That's not a word commonly used in our industry, but it frames a much-needed shift in the conversations we need to have about sponsorship.

Wikipedia defines an investor as *"a person who allocates capital with the expectation of a financial return."*

Now consider your current sales strategy and approach:

- Does your sales team truly view sponsors as investors?
- Are they consulting to help sponsors connect with their desired target market?
- Are they asking smart questions to understand attitudes and perceptions that must be advanced?



Courtesy of Chuck Fazio HeadSHot Lounge

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- Are they offering recommendations on sponsorships that map back to these?
- Are they gauging sponsor expectations for ROI measurement?
- Are they helping sponsors to compete and win?

Or are they pitching sponsorship opportunities in the dark?

Helping Investors Improve Their Sponsorship Return

Now it's time to help your current sponsors envision exactly how this new dynamic will play out at your conference. Investors appreciate it when you walk them through more sophisticated strategies and packages, and then get their input to co-create something better.

Today's sales environment demands a more consultative approach to find, keep and grow top investors. Just as a stock broker might recommend investment shifts to improve a client's mutual fund yield, so too must you be vigilant in guiding sponsors to improve their portfolio performance.

As Top Investors Make the Shift, Others Will Follow

Your sponsor and exhibitor universe might include hundreds (even thousands) of companies. Yet all companies are not created equal. All must be served and satisfied, but some more than others.



Courtesy of FMI Connect

Now, a reality check on the consultative, trusted advisor model we outlined earlier:

It doesn't scale well, but it's your best approach for top investors.

Your top investors must be your first priority, because as they embrace this new model and realize substantial gains, others will notice and follow suit.

Your top investors must be your first priority.

If you haven't segmented your investor list (sponsors, exhibitors, advertisers, etc.) by total spend (booth, sponsorship, advertising, membership, registration revenue, etc.), that's your next step.

Here's one way to tackle it:

Segment 1: Top 10% Investors

Where you draw the line will depend on the size and scope of your event. Often, this category will represent 50% +/- of total supplier revenue. We recommend you err on the conservative side and keep this list short and manageable. Sales strategy for this segment should be 100% consultative, customized and owned by an account manager.

Segment 2: Mid-Range Investors (The next 20%)

Some relationships within this second tier can and should be nurtured to advance to Segment 1. Sales strategy for this segment will be a blend of consultative and transactional. This segment is ripe for upselling.

Segment 3: Everybody Else (Typically 70% or more)

Includes most 10x10 exhibitors and the non-loyal, micro-investors who are churning. Sales strategy for this segment is heavy on transactional. Don't sell them sponsorship. Sell them booth upgrades that include improved visibility.

Consultative Sales Approach

For integrated business development (organized around your customers vs. your products), it will be critical to adopt and embrace a consultative vs. transactional sales model with top investors and prospects. Here's an outline of how the two are vastly different:

Transactional Selling	Consultative Selling
Seller competes against others	Seller helps her customer compete
Single decision maker & seller	Multiple decision makers & sellers (team sales)
Standard pitch	Research and discovery before pitch
Standard proposal & prospectus	Customized proposal mapped to biz priorities
Low margin, high risk of churn	High margins and stickiness
Seller tries to close	Customer closes the deal

The “fewer, but bigger” key attribute of successful sponsorship programs is critical to embrace. Larger sponsors bring marquis value and can trigger more attendee mattering. Larger sponsors tend to be more loyal and their repeated presence can help elevate your brand. With each new event cycle, you ramp up more efficiently, and the wins come faster and better. Investor trust grows and in time, many step up to become year-round investors.



1940's Re-enactment. Crich Railway Village, Easter 2015
Creative Commons

Advancing Buy-In with Old-School Investors

You might encounter a few old-school hold outs, who prefer the standard (less effective) promotional items that really don't qualify as sponsorship. These investors may require a bit more help and guidance to see the light.

If they're dead set on investing substantially in promotional sponsorships, find ways to weave in stronger sponsorship elements. Kim Skildum-Reid penned a great post with more ideas to help this group get up to speed: [How Do You Sell Sponsorship to an Old-School Sponsor?](#)

CHAPTER 3

Upgrading Sponsorship Investment

For sponsors who are investing in menu items that have low to no mattering, consultative sponsorship seekers develop a plan that recommends sponsorship opportunities with greater ROI. They'll approach sponsors who purchased a banner, column wrap or room drop with alternatives that align with attendee mattering.



Courtesy of ASHE PDC Summit

They'll discontinue the room key card sponsorship and shift it to sponsorship of a keynote speaker, live-streamed or scheduled replay experience or experiential show element.

Initial buy-in will be tough for some, but when they realize that you care about their ROI, change will follow.

How to Price Sponsorship

There are four primary ways to price sponsorship items:

1. **Expense Recovery** – These are in-kind or cash investments that you would otherwise be paying out of pocket to fund.
2. **Cost Plus** – (Cost to deliver benefits + Cost of Sales + Cost of Servicing) times three. These should never be discounted by more than 30%.

- 3. Market-Based** – This pricing strategy is based on intelligence gained from competitive research...what the market will bear.
- 4. Value-Based** – This is the holy grail of sponsorship pricing. Sponsor seekers usually can only achieve this with a combination of exclusivity and strong alignment with the sponsor’s target market. Attendee mattering must also consistently hit high marks to warrant this approach.



Courtesy of METALCON

Why Organizations Buy Sponsorship

Seth Godin penned an insightful post to explain why companies make the decision to sponsor - [Understanding Sponsorship](#). In this piece, he outlines five reasons why organizations might invest in sponsorship:

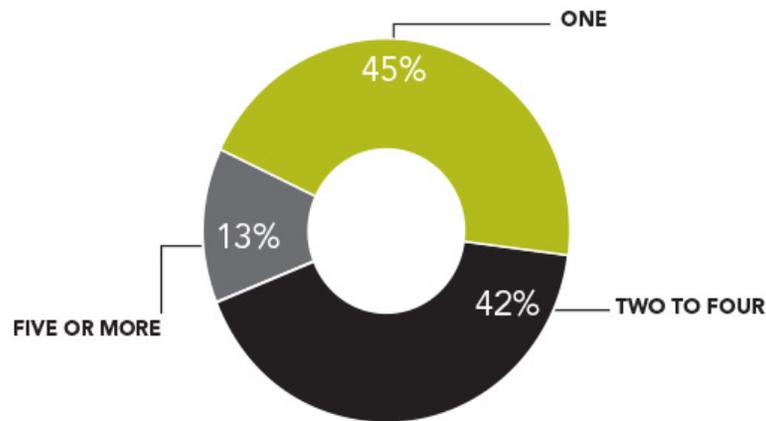
1. Substitute for advertising; more emotional
2. Bragging rights
3. Influence your organization
4. Inspire or add focus to their internal stakeholders
5. Earn a seat at your table

He ends by stating “sponsorships are a screaming bargain compared to traditional media buys, particularly if you’re trying to reach an elite or elusive demographic.” If you have that, shoot for value-based pricing for premium opportunities.

Decisions to Outsource Sponsorship Sales

Some organizations lack the bandwidth to handle sponsorship sales effectively in-house, so they turn to a capable vendor to fulfill this need.

How Many Internal Departments, Chapters Or Third-Party Organizations Are Involved With Selling Sponsorship Or Other Corporate Support (e.g., exhibiting, advertising, donations, local sponsorships, etc.)



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For some, it’s a viable solution, but you can’t outsource relationships entirely, so for top tier investors, you will need to stay very involved.

Larger investors aren’t too fond of “multiple asks” either – one team reaching out for ad sales, another selling exhibit space, and yet another selling sponsorships. Add a foundation team to the mix and things get even more irritating. A holistic approach will be much better received by your investors, especially your big ones.

In a recent study by IEG ([The State of Association Sponsorship](#)), better than half of the respondents had two or more teams pitching to corporate investors. Too many sales pitches coming from different teams stalls decisions and in time, diminishes trust.

Get Your Digital House In Order

The way people buy has changed dramatically. Today, buyers are doing more leg work on their own.

A recent [CEB study](#) revealed that 57% of a typical purchase decision is made before they're ever ready to have a conversation with sales.

Both existing and future sponsorship investors are gathering info. Rather than relying solely on push marketing tactics, you need to become more "pullable," with easy to find sponsorship opportunities and pricing. Make it clear that the prospectus is a starting point. Call out that your preference is to design a custom package for major investment categories.

If you're engaging an outsource partner, consider either keeping your top investors in-house OR designing a more streamlined and unified strategy where you work in tandem to nurture and grow these accounts. Your direct involvement with top investors is critical to future growth.

Set up a plan where you remain involved with the budget maker and outsource servicing to a capable company that can hold the hand of the budget spender.

Helping Sponsors Turbocharge Their Activation Plan

There's been much talk in sponsorship circles about Activation (aka Leverage).

Let's start with a definition...

“Leverage – also known as activation... is what a sponsor does with a sponsorship after the deal is done and is the most critical factor in getting a good result from an investment.”

Kim Skildum-Reid

author of *The Sponsorship Seekers Toolkit 4th Edition*



Courtesy of BIO International Convention

Successful sponsorship sellers discuss activation plans with investors early and often – well before the final agreement is inked. They do this because they know activation is the essential ingredient for ROI and renewal. While others may close deals and disappear, it's the consultative sales person that helps sponsors better articulate, amplify and realize their desired objectives.

Activation plans are owned (and funded) by sponsors, but can be greatly enhanced with proper use of the conference organizers assets. Successful activation elements will often incorporate two threads: One carried out by the sponsor in support of your conference participants. The second, collaboratively carried out through your owned assets. Trust and collaboration, with a focus on the paying attendee, is key to stacking the deck for results.

CHAPTER 4

How Much Should Sponsors Invest in Activation?

Activation investments vary greatly, depending on the sophistication and integration of the sponsor's other marketing initiatives. Skildum-Reid says best practice sponsors spend as little as 10 – 25% of the rights fee, incrementally, to leverage sponsors. Less sophisticated or siloed sponsors will need to spend quite a bit more to activate. These estimates serve as a reminder that sponsorship investment alone will not yield desired results. In today's competitive business environment, creativity and empathy will be key drivers for successful activation.

Sponsors appreciate having a trusted advisor like you who will share ideas and make recommendations to help them get more bang for their buck. To do that, you'll need to help your sponsors answer one big and sometimes hairy, scary question:

What perceptions are you looking to change for this target market?



Courtesy of FMI Connect

This question is rarely asked, but is critical to strategic sponsorships.

Straight from Stephen Covey's *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, you want to **begin with the end in mind**. Help sponsors articulate exactly what should be achieved through this investment. Just as important, find out how they'll measure success.

Once these questions are answered, the next steps for activation will come faster, as you'll be in a much stronger position to identify activation steps that are best poised to deliver on these objectives

Steal & Adapt a Few Ideas From Consumer Events

Here's a somber fact – Consumer and cause-based events own the lion's share of all sponsorship spend. But conferences and trade shows do have a golden opportunity to significantly steal share.

We can learn a lot from the unique fan experiences created at any major sporting event or entertainment experience. As you attend live or view from your TV, consider:

- How are the major sponsors activating?
- Do they have a VIP suite for their best customers?
- Is their product the only one of that type available?
- Are they giving away something to everyone or to a select group of people?
- How are they adding to the fan experience?

Consider the context of each of these, along with how similar big ideas can be applied to your sponsorship and attendee experience strategy.



Courtesy of METALCON

Industry Conferences Have a Leg Up on the WHO

Another key component for activation success is clearly defining the WHO. What target segments does this sponsor desire to reach? The good news: Many professional conferences and trade shows are already hard-wired with target audiences. Your industry conference is a more focused investment vehicle for advancing relationships with a niche segment than other marketing opportunities serving broader audiences. Use this to your advantage!

Activation Built On Attendee Touch Points

From the moment attendees register right through the closing General Session and beyond, there are a multitude of attendee touch points where sponsors can boost attendee experiences.

Share your event timeline with sponsors, including pre- and post-event touch points. Do some brainstorming together to isolate best opportunities to interact with your audience. Identify crescendo moments where perceptions they desire to change can be best leveraged.

Is this sponsor interested in...

Demonstrating thought leadership?

Identify general sessions and concurrents that align with the sponsor's area of expertise. Discuss how the sponsor might support, amplify and extend the attendee's learning experience. It doesn't need to be pay-to-play to get the sponsor's support.

Connecting with new prospects?

Identify activities and networking events where sponsors can make the right new connections faster and better. Don't overlook VIP opportunities, networking spaces and exclusive opportunities.

Deepening relationships with existing customers?

After all the site visits you've done, nobody knows this destination or venue better than you. Sponsors might choose to host more intimate gatherings for their customers. Help them locate and plan unique experiences faster, better and even more affordably.



Courtesy of American Industrial Hygiene Association

Activation to Increase and Enrich Interactions

For some investors, activation plans need to be hands-on experiences. Their plan forces or encourages sales personnel to interact with prospects and clients.

The St. Louis Convention & Visitors Commission (SLCVC) does this very well in our industry. Their booth staff includes their hotel members. They've embraced an activation strategy that's multiplying and improving the exchanges team St. Louis has with attendees.

Build-A-Bear, headquartered in St. Louis, totally gets the power of experiences, fun and mattering. At industry events, stop by the SLCVC booth and experience bear building live. As they help attendees create their furry keepsakes, they're also having some great discovery conversations. It removes any awkwardness around starting up conversations with strangers, plus it's an experience that attendees appreciate, remember and talk about.



St. Louis Convention & Visitors Commission (SLCVC)

Similarly, Tourism Montreal takes activation to the next level with their Breakfast in Bed sponsorship. Recognizing that many attendees are on the run and exhausted, the Montreal team extends an offer to planners involved with sourcing decisions: Let us deliver breakfast to your hotel room one morning during the conference. Mattering + High Empathy = Activation Win!

These “surprise and delight” moments are exactly the kinds of stories you want to share with sponsors to inspire even more great ideas for their own activation plan.

CHAPTER 4

Activation Within the Scope of a Larger Marketing Plan

Sometimes we focus so intently on activation as it applies to our conference, we miss opportunities to ride the coattails of the marketing assets and audiences our investors have at their disposal. Do your homework to understand these assets and consider the ones that can aid your conference experience or reach.

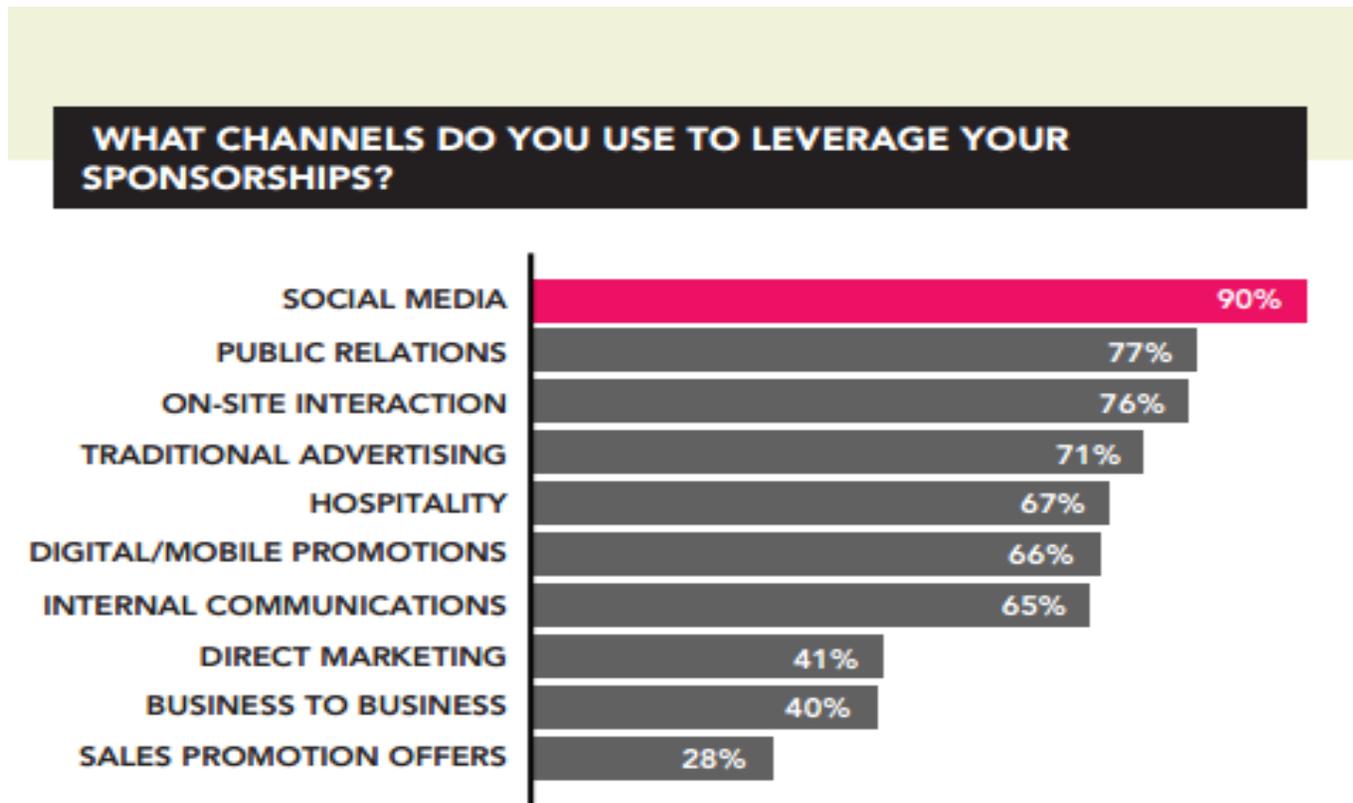


Courtesy of Sage

- Do they embrace content marketing? Will they consider talking about or mentioning their involvement in your conference?
- Do they have access to products that can be used as prizes, giveaways or sampling?
- Does it make sense for them to develop communications that mention your conference or show?
- Do they have access to talent, celebrities or thought leaders that would be valued by your participants?

Each year, IEG conducts a [Performance Research Sponsorship Decision-Makers Survey](#). 2014 marked their 14th year and also the first time that Social Media ranked as the #1 channel for sponsorship activation with 91% utilization. Social Media knocked Public Relations out of the top spot (sliding from 89% in 2013 to 77% in 2014).

Ranking Sponsorship Leverage Channels



Percent of respondents who ranked the factor a 9 or a 10 on a 10-point scale, where 10 is extremely valuable
Source: IEG/Performance Research 2014 Sponsorship Decision-Makers Survey

Along these same lines, there's a growing trend for sponsors to build a microsite or conduct a Facebook campaign around their conference participation. Savvy marketers will also adapt their ads to draw attention to their industry support, which is another way to leverage those sponsorship dollars.



Courtesy of American Industrial Hygiene Association

Extend the Sponsorship Activation Runway

While the live event is where the value peaks, there's more runway to be leveraged in the weeks leading up to your conference or trade show, as well as the weeks following.

The value runway typically starts when registration opens and ends when people stop talking about your conference. Pre-conference activation is prime time, especially if it helps attendees better prepare for their onsite experience and prompts others to attend.

But the post-event value runway is equally important...especially when the activation plan touches not only those that did attend, but those that considered or watched from afar.

Don't Forget the Remote Audience and Non-Attendees

When you extend the sponsorship beyond the few days of the conference or trade show, sponsors are able to reach a much bigger part of their target market. With the rapid growth in live-streaming or scheduled replays of conference sessions to remote audiences, new sponsorship opportunities are emerging. While live participants enjoy richer face-to-face experiences, there are many opportunities for sponsors to interact with the remote audience – and they're craving this interaction. Many are watching broadcasts from their desktop. They're ripe for peer-to-peer digital conversations and they're one click away from accessing additional content to take the learning experience even further.



Courtesy of PLUS D&O Symposium

Beyond the remote audience, there are others who simply couldn't or didn't attend. Some will be scanning the hashtag feed and other social channels to catch highlights of what they missed. Many others will skim the pre- and post-conference communications and story. Once again, this presents more opportunities for sponsors to extend their reach and engage with non-attendees in meaningful ways.

As digital channels continue to expand...

There will be far more sponsorship opportunities waiting to be seized. A sponsorship strategy built on Attendee Mattering will be your fastest and best route to success.

Enjoy the journey!



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About Velvet Chainsaw:

Velvet Chainsaw Consulting (VCC) is the leading choice for conference and trade show organizers interested in growing or transforming their major face-to-face events. We provide expert advice for designing premium education and networking experiences that result in increased loyalty and revenue. With a laser focus on the attendee experience, the VCC team will study and benchmark your business model and value proposition. We customize our recommendations for each client projects.



VCC is comprised of a [team of industry experts](#) who are change agents for where conferences and trade shows need to evolve.

Clients engage us for large projects to solve these problems:

- Conference business model analysis
- Improving attendee acquisition & loyalty
- Differentiating with premium learning experiences
- Fostering more connections & community
- Increasing exhibit/sponsor sales & value
- Strategy Facilitation

For additional information, please visit our website at www.velvetchainsaw.com