

Is Sponsorship Right for Your Company?

Trade shows are a bonanza of sponsorship opportunities. Talk with any show organizers and they'll be more than happy to explain how you can make sure your company's name and logo are plastered all over the arena, on the program guide, over the hospitality suite, even on the tote bags everyone carries around all day.

It's just a simple matter of money - lots of money. Spend enough, and at some conferences, you can get a seat on the event planning committee.

Is all that cash worth it? How do you know that sponsorship is right for your company? Is there a way to determine if underwriting aspects of a trade show will help your bottom line?

Absolutely.

First, it's imperative to understand exactly what sponsorship is. Sponsorship is the financial or in-kind support of an activity, used primarily to reach specified business goals. The fact that sponsorship is undertaken to reach specific business goals clearly delineates it from philanthropy - you won't be able to write off your trade show participation as a charitable contribution.

However, sponsorship is also very different from advertising. Sponsorship is not a solo adventure, the way advertising is. It promotes a company in association with the sponsee.

The next step is to determine why you may want to sponsor an event. Beware of the CEO-trap. This occurs when the CEO is a fan of a particular sport or event and wants to throw corporate dollars behind his personal passion. Throwing the corporate logo on his favorite NASCAR driver's car might make the big man happy, but will it help your company?

Instead, you will want to set some clear, measurable goals for your corporate sponsorship. There are six main reasons why companies embrace sponsorship, including image enhancement, driving sales, increasing visibility with positive publicity, to take on a "Good Corporate Citizen" role, to differentiate from one's competitors and to enhance business, consumer, and VIP relations.

All of these are valid reasons. Assess the proposed sponsorship opportunity against these goals and then ask yourself if sponsoring an aspect of this event will enhance your corporate image. Many companies value the goodwill generated by sponsoring hospitality suites and special meals at trade shows - goodwill that can influence sales.

If sponsoring an aspect of the trade show will meet one or more of these goals, you may want to participate. It's a good idea to do some homework first, before you sign on the dotted line.

Check out the show's image. Is it perceived as a classy, up-scale event? Or does it have a less-than-stellar reputation?

You'll want to know this before you affiliate yourself with the event. Show organizers should be able to provide you with the target audience expected to attend, plans for media coverage of the event and what your obligations as a sponsor are. You'll also want to know what kind of support you can expect from the show organizers and what exactly your sponsorship dollars are buying.

Don't be afraid to ask the tough questions. You are forming a short term partnership with the trade show organizer. Approach it the same way you'd assess any other potential business relationship.

You need to know the event's operational history. Has the show been around for a while and growing every year, or is this a brand-new enterprise? Who were the previous sponsors? How much did they pay to be involved? What are the organizers' backgrounds? Are they affiliated with any non-profit or political organizations?

Check the date of the event and check to make sure that it does not conflict with any other events your company wishes to have a presence at. You should also be provided with a full and complete list of event attractions, including educational programming and receptions.

Sponsorship works best in the context of a relationship. You will often see the same companies supporting the same events year after year after year. This synergy creates a special, unique 'brand' for the duration of the event, a brand that the buying public begins to count on and expect. Make sure you enquire about on-going sponsorship opportunities, as well as cross-promotion opportunities.

Don't dilute your brand by sponsoring every event that comes along. You can afford to be selective here. Pick the one or two events that most closely mirror your corporate image and philosophy - those are the shows that will help you meet your sponsorship goals.

Once you've made up your mind what events you'd like to be affiliated with, contact the event organizers right away. Many sponsorship opportunities are highly competitive and space is limited. There's not a lot of time to dawdle if you want one of only two or three premier spots.

Finally, don't feel limited to what sponsorship opportunities the show organizers offer. If you have a great idea, talk to the organizers about it. Chances are that show organizers will welcome your creativity and they'll be more than willing to accommodate your plan.

Source: Susan A. Friedmann, CSP, The Trade Show Coach, Lake Placid, NY, author: "Meeting & Event Planning for Dummies," working with companies to improve their meeting and event success through coaching, consulting and training. Visit [The Trade Show Coach](#) for a free copy of ExhibitSmart Tips of the Week.

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