

10 STRATEGIES TO Elevate Corporate Support

BY SCOTT BALL

Most associations rely heavily upon their annual meetings for the lion's share of their annual revenues, a substantive amount of which comes from trade shows. The majority of exhibitors at your trade show are intensely scrutinizing the return on their investment. With so many marketing options available today, including all things web-based, it is easy to understand why companies are reconsidering trade shows despite research that supports their effectiveness.

If companies are reallocating their exhibiting budgets, how can associations offset those losses? Can those dollars in jeopardy be saved? What steps can be taken to strengthen your association's value proposition, regardless of its current performance? Let's examine a series of options from the tactical to the strategic level.

Start Here

There are a number of action steps that can be immediately taken and will form a strong foundation from which to build upon:

1. Budget-cycles make a difference.

Corporations either are on a calendar-year budget or have a fiscal-year schedule. Asking the question and tracking this data is essential to planning and securing funds during your greatest window of opportunity.

2. Know the tax consequences.

Sponsorship revenue for 501(c)(6) associations can have a tax consequence, just like with advertising revenue. However, it is possible to structure your program in a non-taxable manner. With tax rates typically around 25 percent, creating a tax-free program can provide a nice boost to sponsorship funds without increasing your number of sponsors.

The differentiator is the language used to describe your program and how it works. For example, the words “partner,” “benefits” and “exposure” are common trigger words that can increase the likelihood of a tax consequence.

3. Communication is key.

Most of us would agree, it is easier to keep a client than find a new one. Maintaining good communication with your current corporate supporters can play an important role in both minimizing attrition and elevating investment in your association. Prepare a communication plan and make sure your supporters are keenly aware of the value they are receiving.

4. Stretch their investment.

Associations have a variety of communication channels at their disposal, including events, web-based communications and print. These channels can deliver increased value for corporate supporters without an association incurring any expenses. For example, sending an email to your members that recognizes a company with a link to their website would offer tremendous value at little or no expense to your association.

Another approach is to design a benefits program that includes pre-event, on-site and post-event activities. Corporations are seeking

sustainable brand recognition and multiple touch points are attractive.

5. Leverage relationships.

Staff-driven efforts are limited. Use your board of directors and other active members who have influence and are willing to leverage their personal capital to identify, generate and sustain corporate support. Remember, keep the tasks manageable or you may lose them before you can make progress.

What's Next

After you have covered the basics, try these more advanced strategies:

6. Find out what they want vs. what you have to offer.

The last thing you should lead with is why you need their support and how it is going to help your organization — that's philanthropy, this is business. Gain a better understanding of what a company is seeking from the existing or potential relationship in order to identify the greatest area of synergy.

Aligning your goals and objectives with theirs is a powerful dynamic that secures six-and seven-figure commitments, even in today's economic environment. Maintain your focus on what you can do for them that they cannot do for themselves and you will be on the right path.

7. Couple access with exposure.

Companies are involved with your association because of a business value proposition. The vast majority of those organizations investing in your association appreciate brand recognition, but are seeking the opportunity to talk with potential or existing customers. Keep this in mind when you create tailored offerings that include the access with the exposure and the value proposition will be elevated.

Peel it back one more layer and be sure you have a clear understand-

ing of their target market within your community. The end result is a more relevant and meaningful experience for all parties involved.

8. Showcase subject matter expertise.

Corporations are seeking “non-commercial” opportunities to be recognized by an association. They understand that this approach is often received more favorably by members, especially buyers. Being able to showcase their subject matter expertise is highly attractive for corporations. They want to be recognized as a thought leader and valued resource, not as a vendor.

Companies have tremendous resources in research and education that can significantly increase the body of knowledge for an association to harness. This may require a culture shift within your association, but the rewards can be very beneficial, especially in the “race for relevancy.”

9. Multi-year deals.

This is a basic concept that is easier said than done. How many of your corporate supporters are making multi-year commitments? And, more importantly, why does this really matter? The answer: You will raise more money. For starters, securing multi-year commitments allows companies to make larger investments.

If you are executing action step No. 3, then you should have satisfied corporate supporters. In turn, you have more time to approach new supporters because you are not resoliciting funds on an annual basis. Being able to broaden your base of corporate support delivers long-term and sustainable value to your association.

10. The conversation starts at “no.”

Associations can expend a great deal


Achieve additional non-dues revenue to carry out your association's educational, charitable, professional and other tax-exempt purposes. Visit the Association Forum's “Corporate Sponsorship” Professional Practice Statement and find out how to secure corporate sponsorships at [associationforum.org>Resources>Samples and Best Practice Guidelines>Professional Practice Statements](http://associationforum.org/Resources/Samples and Best Practice Guidelines/Professional Practice Statements).

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of resources pursuing corporations only to end up hearing “Unfortunately, we have to pass.” Accepting “no” for an answer is a choice. This is not to suggest that it is easy. Find out why they reached that conclusion. Your approach should be non-confrontational, and, at the very least, you may learn how to close the deal with the next company. How-

ever, if you listen carefully and think creatively, you may even be able to make it work in the end.

Elevate your organization's corporate support by starting with action step No. 1. Often the barrier is budget, not what you have to offer. If the company follows a fiscal year budget-cycle then discuss terms that are mutually agreeable for the pay-

ment schedule. Being flexible can help you garner much more than goodwill. 

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