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Getting the "Yes" to Sponsorships

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Abstract

Extension programs and events can be expensive to operate. This article covers innovative ideas to attract business sponsors. Learn how to find decision-makers, create successful requests for funding, and satisfy sponsors before, during, and after events. Effectively marketing Extension programs as a desirable commodity to businesses is an academic and practical endeavor. Businesses need to advertise to attract customers. Most retail stores receive cooperative advertising funds from their suppliers. The implication is that businesses can leverage their dollars by sponsoring your events. By understanding managers' motivations, the outcome will be "yes" when you ask for a sponsorship.

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Introduction

Extension programs and events are expensive to conduct. This article addresses how to find and keep sponsors for activities. The author believes almost any "no" can be turned into a "yes" with the right approach.

In "On the Hunt for 'Fiscal Fuel,'" (Stiehl, Bessey, & Schmall, 1992) recognized that Extension staff must be trained to acquire and administer private and new public funding resources. Businesses need to advertise, so constantly listen to marketing ideas. Extension Services provide valuable programming, which may be logically linked with specific businesses. We can help businesses recognize that partnerships with Extension will enhance their image in the community.

Sponsorship Support Has Many Forms

Be open to whatever the business will provide, for example:

- Cash
- Product donations (a tax advantage)
- Labor (an "in-kind" donation)
- Advertising
- Educational window displays
- Promotional posters
- Word of mouth

Do Your Homework

Be knowledgeable about the business before making a request. What is the decision-maker's name and title? What do they do? Who are their customers? Are sponsorship decisions made locally or elsewhere? For example, local Wal-Mart stores handle smaller donations, while major financial decisions are made at national headquarters.

Think Like the Business

In "When To Look a Gift Horse in the Mouth" (Jackson & Johnson, 1999) point out that sponsors want to know the advantage for them. When you take their money, you are obligated to meet their

expectations. Create a simple written agreement outlining who will provide what by when. For example: OSU Extension will provide instructors, advertising, and meeting space. The business will provide \$1000 for materials, due June 1, and distribute flyers through their location starting May 1.

Attract Their Interest

In the initial contact with a decision-maker, it's imperative to attract their interest, response, and participation. Managers are flooded with requests and endeavor to invest wisely. Educate the business about the value of your program. Tell the potential sponsor what you are offering that they cannot do for themselves. Compare the value of your program offer with those of other organizations. For an after-school program, point out that 4-H conducts education-based experiential learning, not childcare. The difference is why a company should donate to Extension 4-H, a non-profit organization.

Tap the Cooperative Advertising Funds

An innovative idea is to tap into a store's cooperative advertising funds ("coop"). Merchandise manufacturers allocate coop advertising dollars to retail stores, to help the store do more advertising featuring the manufacturer's products. Brand name exposure benefits the vendor and helps a company keep its name in front of the buying public. Most stores don't use all their annual coop balance. Partner with the store to use their coop to support your event. It's free money for them, and it helps you.

Ad dollars are determined by the store's purchases from one manufacturer. For example, the manufacturer offers to coop 5% for every \$1,000 in merchandise purchased. When the store advertises a specific product from that manufacturer, the manufacturer pays 70% of the advertising bill for the store. That's \$50 in coop that could be invested towards an Extension activity.

Here are more tips.

- Watch for new product lines or Grand Openings. Vendors give extra money and merchandise to stores for advertising.
- Ask for samples or unwanted merchandise. Company representatives always have product samples they give away. These are valuable awards and incentives.
- Ask stores for discontinued merchandise--hard to sell items. Offer to take it away, and provide a tax write-off letter.
- Contact national companies directly, and ask for free products. Premium pet food companies are generous with donating bags of food.
- Develop relationships with store managers, and have your volunteers support local businesses. Become regular customers whom store management recognizes. The old adage, "it's not what you know, it's who you know," is valid when asking for sponsorships.

Prepare Ahead to Get the "Yes"

Role-playing is one useful method for practicing asking before going to potential sponsors. Here are some basic concepts to getting the "yes" by asking right--and guaranteed ways to fail.

- Confidently state your request, giving reasons how they will benefit. Winners approach sponsors with a positive attitude.
- You wouldn't ask a 4-H agent to help with something unrelated during their county fair. Similarly, don't show up at an accountant's office on April 14th expecting them to be receptive to giving you free services!
- Plan ahead for business budget cycles. Extension Services have a fiscal year different than the calendar year common to businesses.
- Be prepared with facts about the activity when you make your the sales pitch. Leave clear written information with the contact person's name, phone, and e-mail address.
- Make giving easy. You're representing a non-profit organization, so provide a tax deduction letter.

Conclusion

Every company has three voices to the outside world: advertising, sales promotion, and public relations. Make your request meet all of these needs. Satisfy the businesses' needs. When they're happy with the results, ask for and get a "yes" for future sponsorships. Show them how sponsoring Extension programs help them connect with and serve their important customers.

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