



MASSAGING CORPORATE SPONSORSHIPS IN A RECREATION SETTING

Park and recreation agencies are beginning to pursue sponsorship agreements with the private sector more aggressively than ever before. For some agencies, sponsorship revenues provide vital sources of funding to operate certain programs, events or facilities that otherwise could not have been offered (Crompton, 1999). Given the growing importance of these revenues to the financial stability of many program offerings, it is important for park and recreation agencies to foster long-term relationships with their corporate sponsors.

Separate Sponsorship from Philanthropy

Sponsorship is not a philanthropic exercise. Sponsors do not provide resources and expect nothing in return and in fact engage in sponsorship activities in order to pursue their own corporate goals. In particular, they hope to enhance their performance in the marketplace.

Corporations tend to look for very specific types of opportunities as they select initiatives to sponsor. Specifically, they typically evaluate such initiatives in terms of their capacity to deliver enhanced image, awareness and/or sales. They will judge the merit of any proposal in terms of its ability to help themselves in these important areas.

Approach Sponsorship Negotiations as a Full Partner

Park and recreation professionals should consider sponsorships as an exchange of mutually beneficial resources between two parties. Both the agency and the partner it is seeking are looking for assistance in something that cannot be realized singularly. The sponsored organization provides essential resources (e.g., facilities, programs, events, parks) that enable sponsors to communicate with their intended audiences (e.g., potential clients, external organizations) to achieve commercial objectives. In return for access to these markets, the sponsored organization typically receives some form of financial or in-kind support.

Find a Link

Both parties involved achieve sponsorship success when a good sponsor-provider fit is found. Both parties need to feel that this is an arrangement that will help them achieve their organizational goals. There must be a logical connection between the sponsor and the initiative being sponsored. This is critical because the sponsor will likely want to link a product with something the service represents. By linking a product to a particular recreation service, businesses hope to borrow the image of a recreation event and use it to enhance the product's image within the minds of its target audience.

Research has also found that customers who easily see the relationship between a company and the event it sponsors generally have more positive responses to that sponsorship.

Deliver an Audience the Sponsor Cares About

Sponsors want their sponsorship dollars to reach their own target audience and will assess a sponsorship opportunity in terms of how well it delivers that audience. Roy and Cornwell (2004) call this "target market overlap" and as Crompton (1999) noted it is vital for park and recreation managers to be able to say to a company, "Your clients are our clients".

Sponsors may be seeking several types of overlap. They may seek a fit based on several geographic, socio-demographic, and/or psychographic characteristics. Under conditions where there is a great deal of target market overlap, intended audiences will likely put more effort into processing sponsorship messages because the advertisements may become more personally relevant to them.

Evaluate and Report on Sponsorship Success

A recent survey of more than 200 sponsoring companies suggests that many sponsors are unsure if sport and recreation sponsorships meet the objectives they set for them. As a result, sponsors of park and recreation services are increasingly asking for evidence that their investment has generated a commercial return. In other words, the sponsorship is not complete until the success of the sponsorship has been measured and reported to the sponsor.

Sponsors tend to place the responsibility for such monitoring squarely on the organization or event being sponsored. In effect, they are asking those they sponsor to prove that the initiative delivered on all its promises. It is recommended that sport and recreation organizations incorporate measurement audits in the proposal packages they present to prospective sponsors. Such efforts will also foster long-term relationships with sponsors.

Make Sponsorship Agreements Citizen-Friendly

Sponsorship of public sector sport, recreation and cultural events is generally not a very contentious issue. When questioned, the majority of citizens are relatively supportive of corporate sponsorship for public park agencies. Sponsorships with local companies, monetary sponsorships and sponsorships of free programs are perceived favorably.

The terms of many sponsorship agreements can, however, create some community ire. For example, the naming of facilities and events for corporate sponsors has received very mixed reviews from community members. The potential public backlash associated with this sort of branding of public space can put a significant strain on sponsor-provider relations and can hasten the end of a partnership as well as place unnecessary burden on the local agency.

It is recommended that citizen-friendly guidelines for designing sponsor recognition programs in public park and recreation settings be developed. First, service providers should consider using sponsor naming rights sparingly.

Park and recreation providers should also select an appropriate location for recognizing sponsors and donors. In a recent study many citizens were more in favor of recognizing sponsorship contributions at indoor rather than outdoor locations. Park and recreation providers are encouraged to establish sponsorship advertisement size and content restrictions. The authors of the study advocate avoiding slogans, sales pitches and agency endorsement of sponsors when designing sponsorship messages. In general, citizens accept that the sponsor should be visible at the event being sponsored, but wished that the corporate agenda not be pursued too aggressively.

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