CASHING IN
on Corporate Sponsorship

By Dale Masterson
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There are many skills required to be a successful student programmer. One of the more important is the ability to effectively utilize an assigned budget and make your dollars go as far as possible. The student program board members I advise at the University of California-Riverside are fortunate to have a large budget to work with each year (approximately $530,000). Even with a large budget, though, there are often acts we’d like to book, events we’d love to schedule, or annual events we’d like to expand that aren’t fiscally possible. Our program board members have had to learn how to make the most of their budgets to see their goals become reality.

One of the creative ways our student programmers have been able to expand programming has been through corporate sponsorships. During the 2004-2005 school year, our students successfully raised almost $15,000 in sponsorship funds and merchandise, which permitted them to expand programming for the student body. Businesses are often seeking ways to increase their visibility with local college students; all it takes to get them on board with your programming is for someone to create a proposal, pitch it to them and follow up for a decision.
Several years ago, when our program board students first attempted to obtain corporate sponsorship funds, they quickly learned what was most effective and what wasn’t. In that first year, they developed a letter requesting funds for a specific event and mailed it to several local businesses. They then waited for the phone to ring with businesses wanting to give them money. They waited, and waited—but no responses came in. Much like the limited effectiveness of telemarketers cold calling people, these businesses didn’t respond to just a letter.

10 Steps to Cash in on Corporate Sponsorships

Learning from this failure, they then spent time identifying what would be a more effective approach and developed a series of steps for securing corporate sponsorships.

- Select one board member to coordinate the corporate sponsorship process.
- Create a list of local business to be contacted. Focus on businesses that naturally want contact with college students, such as apartment complexes, banks, restaurants, etc. A quick way to identify these businesses is to review your campus newspaper to see who is already trying to reach students through advertisements.
- Develop corporate sponsorship proposals, tailoring them to each business on the list. (See suggested content of sponsorship proposals at right.)
- Have the coordinator create and post a chart for tracking progress to establish a healthy level of competition among board members, or identify incentives for obtaining the most sponsorships as a way to motivate everyone.
- Have the coordinator assign individual program board members to the identified businesses.
- Have program board members schedule appointments to pitch proposals in person to their assigned business owners or managers.
- Make the pitches to businesses and answer any questions that arise.
- Initiate regular follow up with business owners/managers to answer any additional questions and to obtain a decision.
- Gather all necessary and pertinent information from businesses agreeing to provide sponsorships (i.e. logo for event marketing, donated merchandise or funds).
- Send thank-you letters and event marketing to sponsoring businesses.

What to Include in a Corporate Sponsorship Proposal

One of the most important steps in the sponsorship process is thoroughly developing your sponsorship proposal. An effective proposal grabs the attention of the business owner, makes them want to be a part of your exciting event, and provides them with an overview of the event.

The proposal should include:

- An overview of your organization—your identity, mission, etc.
- An overview of the event—description, goals, time and location, expected attendance, performers and other information about what will take place.
- Photos of students having fun at last year’s event if you’re seeking funds for an annual event, copies of your poster, flyers, newspaper ads, newspaper articles, event T-shirts, etc.
- A sample budget for the event. If you’re seeking a monetary donation, clearly identify additional programming that will be made possible as a result of the business’ involvement.
- An outline of what the business will receive for its donation. It’s helpful to establish various funding levels and visibility received accordingly. This can be done for any size event, as well as any donation dollar range. Below is an example of how our program board structures funding levels for its annual end-of-the-year outdoor concert, Spring Splash:

  - **Silver Sponsorships:** A donation of less than $1,000 entitles the business to have its logo displayed as a Silver Sponsor on the poster and flyer.
  - **Gold Sponsorships:** A donation of $1,000-$2,900 entitles the business to have its logo displayed as a Gold Sponsor on the poster, flyer, newspaper ads and on the program board’s Web site.
  - **Platinum Sponsorships:** A donation of $3,000 or more entitles the business to have its logo displayed as a Platinum Sponsor on all printed marketing (i.e. poster, flyers, event T-shirt, newspaper ads, vinyl banners), electronic marketing (i.e., program board’s Web site, campuswide e-mail messages), and any miscellaneous marketing (i.e., window painting on the cafeteria windows); emcee announcements at the event; and, a canopy, table and chairs provided in a highly visible area at the event.

Types of Sponsorships to Consider

The University of California-Riverside’s program board has had much success obtaining sponsorships—financial and merchandise donations—due to a well thought-out sponsorship proposal and its persistence in following up with businesses.
Merchandise donations have included:

- A national ice cream chain donated gift certificates the program board awarded to audience members who could successfully answer trivia questions related to the event.
- A national donut chain donated 50 dozen glazed donuts—10 dozen per day for five days—which the program board gave away to entice students to stop by their booth and take a flyer promoting Welcome Week activities.
- A newly opened restaurant gave 100 sport bottles, each containing coupons that were given away to audience members.

Financial donations have included:

- During the 2004-2005 school year, Director of Concerts Jimmy Blalock successfully acquired a $2,500 donation from a local credit union as a sponsorship for the fall Nooner Concert Series. This allowed him to cover the weekly staging expense, while freeing up other funds to book bigger name bands.
- For the 2005 Spring Splash concert, the program board obtained four Platinum Sponsorships totaling $12,000—$3,000 from a local bank and $3,000 each from three apartment complexes—that allowed them to expand the event. One apartment complex was hesitant to commit to a Platinum Sponsorship, so Program Board Chair Pamela Rivera, who was assigned to this business, quickly pointed out that both of the complex’s major competitors had committed to Platinum Sponsorships and would be getting a lot of visibility from this event; the third complex immediately signed up.

Other types of donations you can seek include:

- If your budget does not allow for the printing of an event T-shirt, approach your T-shirt company to negotiate free or half-price printed T-shirts in exchange for allowing the company to print its logo and contact information with your T-shirt artwork.
- If a full-color event poster or flyer is beyond your means, request a reduced price for permitting the printing company to place its logo and contact information in the lower corner of your materials.
- Solicit your favorite local restaurants
for free meals to provide to visiting artists instead of purchasing hospitality for them.

- Request gift cards from local restaurants, grocery stores, shopping malls or other businesses frequented by your students; they will be door prizes that audience members will love receiving.

Additional Tips to Keep in Mind

In order to have the most success possible with corporate sponsorships, there are other important considerations to keep in mind.

- If you offer to print a sponsor’s logo on your event marketing, clearly convey to them what format and resolution you will need it in, and by what date. There’s nothing more disappointing to a sponsor than to see their logo appearing grainy or pixilated on your poster or flyer. It can also be frustrating for your marketing to be late because you were waiting to receive logos from sponsors.

- If you are receiving a financial donation, it’s important to make sure you have received the sponsor’s check before printing their logo on your marketing, in case they change their mind. (Better yet, ask your campus business officer to develop a contract between your organization and the corporate sponsor.)

- Regardless of the value of a merchandise or financial donation, it is important to properly express your gratitude to the sponsor. This will help establish an ongoing relationship of giving. Since our program had so much success in obtaining Platinum Sponsorships for its 2005 Spring Splash, we ordered small plaques for each of the sponsors. This gave them something to hang in their establishment as evidence of their goodwill, as well as providing additional PR for both their company and the program board. It also serves as a visible reminder to them of their prior sponsorships.

No Limits to the Possibilities

No matter the size of your organization, your funding or your level of programming, you should challenge yourself to effectively utilize your budget. Sponsorships can easily allow you to expand your programming while providing fun prizes for audience members. You are limited only by your creativity and persistence: creativity in identifying potential sponsors and developing sponsorship proposals, and persistence in following up with businesses and not giving up if you’re told “no!”

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About the Author

Dale Masterson is director of Student Orientation and Involvement at the University of California-Riverside, where he previously served as assistant director of the Student Life and Leadership Center. Earlier in his career, he served as an admissions counselor at Rockhurst University (MO), as well as at Emporia State University (KS). In NACA he has served as the NACA West conference coordinator, having also served as the region’s communications coordinator and as the education and professional development coordinator for the former NACA Far West Region. Additionally, he was a facilitator for the NACA SGA West and Leadership West workshops. On the national level, he was a member of the Educational Sessions Review subcommittee of the 2004 National Convention Program Committee. He holds a bachelor’s degree in communication from Emporia State University (KS) and a master’s degree in counseling and guidance from the University of Missouri-Kansas City. This is his third article for Campus Activities Programming.

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