

Saying 'No' By Lin Gensing-Pophal

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A Gus Macker 3-on-3 basketball tournament is coming to your community and you've been approached about a sponsorship. The basketball aficionados at your company are encouraging you to say "yes." The event is sure to get a lot of attention, they say, and it will be a lot of fun besides. The American Cancer Society's Relay for Life event will be held this summer to raise funds for cancer research. Your HR vice president is undergoing chemotherapy for lymphoma and employees are lobbying for a corporate sponsorship. Your industry's annual conference provides an opportunity to sponsor a trade show exhibit. Thousands are expected to attend. Your marketing manager thinks it would be a good way to gain some credibility in the industry.

SHOULD YOU DO IT?

There are literally thousands of potential events you could sponsor — but how can you narrow down those options to select the events that are right for you? The key is thinking strategically.

Sandra Beckwith is the author of *Streetwise Complete Publicity Plans* (Adams Media, May 2003) and principal of Beckwith Communications in Fairport, NY. "Basically," she says, "I tell businesses that a sponsorship is right for their company if the opportunity fits well with the organization's goals and personality; the sponsorship will help the company reach its target audience; the opportunity allows the company to reach its goals; and it's affordable."

Sounds simple. But the answers to these questions aren't quite so straightforward and not quickly or readily answered in all cases.

THE RIGHT FIT

Your organizational mission statement, strategic plan or annual goals can provide you with some strong clues about the types of events that are — and are not — appropriate for your organization. That doesn't mean that if you're an architectural firm you always say "yes" to Earth Day celebrations, but never health-related causes.

What it does mean is that you need to give some consideration to the types of events that make the most sense based on your unique goals and mission. You can't sponsor everything — and you shouldn't. Your choices should send a signal to your market about who you are and what's important to you.

HITTING THE TARGET

Fox Rothschild, LLP, a full-service law firm with eight regional offices in Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Delaware, wanted to "establish a signature event for our firm's Women's Marketing Group and support a charity," says Kim Nguyen, the firm's marketing manager. What do businesswomen do? They golf — especially when the golf outing is a fundraiser to support a cause like breast cancer.

If an event you're involved with doesn't somehow reach an audience that's important to you, you're not using your resources wisely. The audience for an event may not always be clear; ask the event organizer to tell you who has attended the event in the past and who the event is being marketed to.

MEETING ORGANIZATIONAL GOALS

Rob Frankel, a branding consultant and the author of *The Revenge of Brand X: How to Build a Big Time Brand on the Web or Anywhere Else* (Frankel & Anderson, Inc., 2000) says that

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selecting events is “a branding issue, plain and simple. The most important part about choosing an event is selecting one that's compatible with your brand, which is something that most companies overlook.”

Most companies, he says, tend to favor size over substance. For example, they might choose an event with huge sponsors, hoping that the “big” factor will rub off on them. What they should be doing, says Frankel, is selecting events that “enhance their brand promise and deliverability. The problem is that few companies have true brand strategies, so they have no criteria to make that decision.”

AFFORDABLE

Cost is always a consideration when deciding whether or not to sponsor an event and that includes not only the cost of sponsorship, but also the cost of staff time, travel, development of collateral materials, etc. Those costs can then be applied toward your goals, so you might be calculating “cost per one thousand impressions,” or “cost per lead,” or “cost per conversion.” The realistic cost estimates you come up with should be compared against your other marketing efforts to provide some indication of cost effectiveness.

As Frankel stresses, bigger isn't necessarily better. Conversely, says Denise O'Berry, president of The Small Business Edge Corp., in Tampa, “don't dismiss ‘expensive’ events right away. Just because an entry cost is high doesn't mean you can't afford it.”

Knowing the opportunities that exist in your market can help you to prioritize and be proactive when it comes to event sponsorship. Some good starting points to build a list of potential events include:

Contacting Chambers of Commerce or convention and visitors bureaus in the communities where you're interested in having a presence and asking for a list of past and planned events.

Becoming familiar with industry and association events targeted toward your potential customers on both a local and national basis.

Involving employees. It's certainly legitimate to sponsor an event solely because the cause is near and dear to employees as long as one of your stated goals is to do this. Some organizations charge a team of employees with deciding, on an annual basis, what cause to promote and build that cause into their event sponsorship plan.

Once you've developed an exhaustive list of opportunities (including audience and cost), you can assign priorities to each event. Your budget and staff resources will help you determine how far down on this list of priorities you're able to go. Applying this level of rigor to the selection process takes time, but helps you avoid being reactive to opportunities that “crop up” unexpectedly. And when a “really great” opportunity does crop up, you can simply add it to the list for consideration next year.

Lin Gensing-Pophal is a freelance writer based in Chippewa Falls, WI.

That's Our Story — and We're Sticking to It!

HOW DO YOU tell your hard-working basketball fanatics that you just don't think Gus Macker is right for your organization?

How do you tell your employees that you aren't going to provide a corporate sponsorship in honor of a well-liked, and very ill, executive?

How do you turn down a marketing opportunity that you think would cost too much or divert attention from other strategic initiatives?

Following are some key components of an event sponsorship policy:

- Where requests should be directed. Centralizing decision making is a good way to ensure consistency and the best use of your event sponsorship dollars.
- Priority considerations. Which events will receive priority consideration? What types of events are clearly “won't do's” (i.e. activities or events that take place outside of your service or sales area).
- Maximum contributions at various approval levels. Perhaps corporate communications can approve sponsorships up to \$5000, but \$5000 and higher need approval by an executive committee.
- Budget. How much is your organization willing to spend on an annual basis to support events?
- Application guidelines. You may want to indicate that all requests must be made in writing, within a certain timeframe prior to the event, and must include an itemization of all related costs and all related benefits or value offered for your involvement.
- How you will respond. Many organizations' policies simply state: “all responses will be sent in writing.”
- Follow up reporting. One of the criteria of your participation in an event may be that the sponsoring organization provide you with a summary after the event, including such things as participants and their demographics, promotion, media coverage, etc.
- Saying no is inevitable. But, when organizations contact you about the possibility of event sponsorship, especially local or cause-related event sponsorships, it can be difficult to say no. It's less difficult if you know why you're saying no, can articulate this to the event organizer and have a track record of being consistent in your sponsorship activities. A policy can help guide not only those directly responsible for making these decisions, but can help to manage expectations of staff throughout the organization.