ABC’s of Regatta Sponsorship

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We all strive to create an event where participants enjoy good, clean, fun racing; where event organizers are delighted to be involved; and where sponsors feel they are receiving a good return on their investment. You shouldn’t be afraid to ask for sponsorship when organizing a regatta, but keep in mind that it’s a two-way street.

Generally speaking, the reason you need sponsorship is to provide some level of added value to the competitors, while keeping escalating regatta costs under control. We all know that one way for organizers to cut costs is to ask for “free stuff” instead of buying it at retail prices. It’s important, however, to note that the more free stuff (or even cash in some cases) you ask for, the more the local merchant should be able to expect from you.
GET ORGANIZED EARLY

It’s unfortunate how common it is for an event organizer to solicit local businesses for their support of an upcoming sailing event and then ask for their generous contributions to be delivered immediately. Exercise common courtesy and be sure to give your potential supporters at least six weeks to gather and deliver the necessary product to properly support your event. Remember to respect the concept that most merchants and their companies have day to day business to conduct, and that most events likely will not take priority over this.

Also, be sure to follow up a commitment conversation with an e-mail or a written letter of agreement, so both you and the merchant are clear on who will get what. I have found that on more basic levels, this is best achieved by simply writing an advance thank you letter reiterating the simple terms of the deal. This goes a long way in minimizing any confusion. Be sure to include dates and location of your event, ideal delivery dates of merchant’s product, and delivery address.

Be sure to properly wrap up your event with a thank you letter to each sponsor. As simple as this sounds, it’s often overlooked. I like the idea of a report paragraph within this note explaining how valuable the merchant’s contribution was to the success of the event. This is also a great time to mention that you hope they en-
Organizers of the 1999 Van Isle 360 Regatta, Wash., offered sponsors banners at the dock parties (left), as well as signage for the sails on each competing boat (below).
Kathy D’Hall photo

joyed and benefited from the experience, and that they will once again show their support next year.

**ADD A LITTLE MORE FUN**

To add a nice spark to your event, put together a raffle or prize giveaway. These have become very common at the regional championship level with local merchants and a few specific marine industry-based companies who have that rare, "Once they try it, then they'll buy it" confidence. These days, marketing-minded companies often provide product for signage at significant events around the globe, to be distributed at the prizegiving, or at after-dinner raffles. This adds to the list of winners at any level event, as not only the race winners walk away with cool prizes.

**SO NOW YOU'RE TALKING MONEY**

You've got the basic idea of how event sponsorship works. Your weekend club regatta was a huge success, and now you've been asked to organize a regional championship in a similar manner. This event will be much larger, and so is its accompanying budget.

In addition to reducing your budget through product contributions of food, bottled water, etc., you still have a significant dollar amount needed. Cash sponsorship deals can happen at many various levels, from a $25 supporter to a $10,000 title sponsor, and in some cases, even higher numbers are possible.

Here's an example of a potential deal. Let's say you struck a deal with your local car dealer (yes, sailing does boast desirable demographic), whereby for a cash contribution of $1,000, the dealer will place a vehicle on display. In addition, you have agreed to place two event banners around the picnic area where the prizegiving will be held. The dealer has also asked that a commercial flyer be inserted into each sailor's registration kit.

While this sounds simple, managing the expectations of the sponsor is probably the most common area of failure in properly fulfilling a sponsor's requirements. It's crucial to provide both accurate and conservative figures when presenting the scenario to a sponsor who is new to sailing events. Using our car dealer example, you should expect to walk them through the grounds where the event will take place and discuss traffic flow and peak timing opportunities, so the sponsor can staff his display in an efficient manner. Let them know that there may be only 10 people within 100 yards of the vehicle while the participants are on the water. Maybe the dealer is interested in VIP hospitality or spectator boat privileges?

Remember, when asking potential sponsors for real cash, it's important to know that they are considering reaching into their own pocket for one of two reasons: 1. They truly want to help provide added value to the event on behalf of the organizers and participants; and/or 2. They seek real return for their investment, just as they would from a high-quality ad, or any other business investment.

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