Sponsorship 101: How Partnerships Can Expand Summer Reading

By Steven Engelfried and Angela Reynolds

CORPORATE SPONSORSHIP CAN BE A TRICKY ISSUE, BUT IF USED CAREFULLY, IT CAN HELP GET MORE KIDS READING AND USING THE LIBRARY

Corporate sponsorship in public libraries is a scary thing. As public institutions dedicated to free, equal, and untainted access to our services, we get justifiably nervous about alliances with profit-oriented businesses. Yet, thanks to corporate sponsorship, Oregon’s 2000 Statewide Summer Reading Program participation was double that of 1997. For the first time, the Oregon Library Association (OLA) sent promotional materials to libraries at no cost, gave libraries grants to hire guest performers, and launched a statewide advertising campaign.

So what led us down this treacherous road? Simply put, we knew we should be reaching more kids and hoped corporate sponsors might help us succeed. Though successful, our 1997 statewide summer reading program was far from perfect. The children’s services division of OLA produced materials, then sold them to libraries around the state, hoping to break even. Corporate sponsorship seemed like a possible solution to our financial worries. Our original goal was to find a company to put up the $15,000 or so it cost to produce the materials so we could offer them free to libraries. It sounded simple enough—but that just shows how little we knew.

In 1998 we formed a task force to investigate ways of funding the summer reading program. Although the roster included several excellent, well-meaning library types, we soon realized we knew nothing about how to reach corporate sponsors, how to make presentations, or even how much to ask for. So we found someone who did.

We met with the Metropolitan Group, a Portland public relations firm. The company’s president agreed the program could engage sponsorship interest, but he thought we were asking for too little and encouraged us to expand our modest goal of securing printing funds—to decide exactly where we would like our statewide summer reading program to go. Corporations, he explained, are more likely to give a lot of money for a high-profile program that makes a noticeable difference than they are to offer a small amount for a relatively minor result.

The first stage was developing our vision. Using a $6,500 LSTA grant, we contracted with the Metropolitan Group to help us develop a viable plan. Through brainstorming sessions, mail surveys, and e-mail input, we came up with major objectives for an expanded statewide summer reading program, which included increasing participation, providing performers at no cost to libraries, and mounting a statewide publicity campaign.

Throughout this process we made it clear to libraries that while we intended to use grants and corporate sponsors to achieve our goals, we would be careful. Our sponsors would have to be ones that a consensus of libraries around the state found acceptable. Appearances by members of our task force at conferences and director’s meetings, as well as frequent updates through online discussion lists and the OLA newsletter, helped keep communication open.

The next step was to get the funding. And that’s where things got a little nerve-wracking. Firms like the Metropoli-

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tan Group do not work for free. And they can’t guarantee that any sponsor will commit funds to a project, even one as appealing as summer reading. If we reached all our fundraising goals through grants and sponsors, the Metropolitan Group’s fees would be covered as part of the package. However, we would have to pay the public relations firm’s bills long before that sponsorship money came rolling in. So we took a risk: We committed $10,000 to the project with the understanding that we could lose the whole amount if no sponsors were willing to commit. The OLA executive board members felt that the potential benefit to children and families around the state was worth the gamble. By mid-September things were getting tense; we had received no commitments and were approaching the $10,000 limit. Fortunately, the Craig Berkman Family stepped forward with a $45,000 donation. The Wells Fargo Foundation, Oregon Public Broadcasting, and Washington Mutual bank soon followed, and we were in business.

Our fundraising did not quite meet our original goal, but it was enough to make a substantial impact. The publicity campaign included print, radio, movie-screen, and even grocery-bag advertisements. We sent free posters, bookmarks, and temporary tattoos to every library that requested them, ensuring that no community would be without a program due to lack of funds. And we gave 124 libraries grants of $200 apiece to hire guest performers to promote the program in their communities.

When we learned that we would actually be able to provide so much, we had to quickly figure out the most efficient ways to make it happen. We had to develop a method of not only distributing the money, but also making sure that libraries gave credit to the sponsors and that we could report to our sponsors how the money was used. We created a simple, one-page grant application that included a pledge to return an evaluation form and any press clippings after the program was presented. Award letters were sent to the libraries that received funding, along with flyer templates, sample press releases, and the evaluation form. Once the system was developed, the process went smoothly.

As a result of the program grants, over 9,000 children were treated to storytelling, puppet shows, music, science presentations, magic shows, and a host of other cultural events. Only a handful of the 124 libraries would have been able to offer these programs without our funding. Many were so proud of their programs that they sent photographs, flyers, and news clippings along with the evaluations. The Metropolitan Group then worked these pieces into a packet to entice potential sponsors the following year.

With 119 libraries reporting their statistics, we counted 80,832 participants for 2000. In 1997, when we first began investigating the idea of sponsorship, the participation rate was around 39,500. We had nearly reached our five-year goal of 98,855 children in the first sponsorship year. Libraries large and small reported great successes, from 30,000 participants in Multnomah County to 12 in the town of Fossil.

With the increased visibility of the program, we expected to see more children participating, and we did. Other results were pleasantly unexpected, such as increased local support for the summer reading program and children’s programs in general, the ability to offer expanded programs for teens, and the amount of time and energy saved by the youth librarians who implement the programs.

But as we made our first year’s journey into sponsorship, we came to realize that with all roses come thorns. There were snags in getting the programming checks out to libraries in a timely manner. By the time some libraries realized they had not ordered enough materials, we had run out of many items. Sending out grant applications, award letters, and sponsorship information to 124 libraries cost staff unanticipated time and postage. Some libraries were still hesitant to participate in a program with sponsors’ names on the materials. The task force has taken all these items into consideration, and while we know that more rough spots will occur, we have begun to fine-tune the summer reading machine.

We may never be completely comfortable with corporate sponsorship in public libraries—not should we. But using corporate resources is not the same as selling your soul to the devil. In Oregon we’ve seen some impressive results that would not have been possible without corporate involvement. Used selectively and imaginatively, corporate sponsorship can be a powerful tool to help us achieve our mission of getting more kids reading and visiting the library.

LESSONS LEARNED
In our first year of corporate sponsorship, we learned:

> Information sharing is crucial. Our efforts improved significantly when we involved OLA members outside the children’s division. Besides contributing valuable ideas, they helped us present the project as one that benefits Oregon libraries in general, not just youth departments. We kept the OLA executive board informed and involved throughout, which meant that when a financial risk was necessary, they were able to see the potential long-term impacts.

> Work with experts. As we collaborated with the Metropolitan Group we realized we knew even less about sponsorship outreach than we originally thought. We paid for their services, of course, and had no guarantee that they would raise the funds we hoped for, but their professional expertise was invaluable. The goals of a consulting firm are not always exactly the same as those of a public library, however, so it was crucial that we made clear our particular needs and requirements throughout the process.

> Never relax. Corporate sponsorship will continue to be a tricky issue in public libraries. We must consider the pros and cons of every potential sponsor, make sure our contracts state specifically what each sponsor contributes and expects in return, and continually communicate the status of sponsorship with libraries around the state.