

Race Sponsorship

The first question directors of a new race ask is: "What does it take to have a successful race?"

Most new directors have visions of the Tulsa Run or the Redbud Classic where thousands run down the streets of their city. The key element of a successful race is building a tradition. This takes promotion and promotion takes money. Some new directors have been misled to believe that entry fees will cover all costs and have some left over for whatever charity or non-profit the race benefits. The very basic race in most cases could not survive on entry fees alone. An extremely large field with a minimum of costs would come close to breaking even. This, of course, would depend on many factors.

So, the answer to the first question is sponsorship. Again, many new directors immediately think of some major corporation in Oklahoma that would give thousands of dollars to his/her race. Most are disappointed after approaching these companies to find that the fiscal-year budget has already been set. This is not to say that major companies are not interested in sponsoring road races. However, most of these companies have probably already been asked. This reminds us of a recent trip to one of the big soft drink distributors to talk about donating product. While we were sitting in this person's office the phone rang no less than half a dozen times. These calls were from individuals representing various events requesting donations of product. Even though this was a small request it happens many times a day. The real key to approaching a major sponsor is who does the asking. Needless to say, a person in a prominent position who has contacts can be the real force in sponsorship. However, most races in the state will not enjoy the benefits of major sponsorship.

The other approach is many small sponsors. We remember one race that had over 75 different sponsors listed in their brochure. This was put into categories depending on the amount of sponsorship. This ranged from major sponsors to contributors to in-house donations.

Sponsors of some races volunteer printing and typesetting services for brochures and ads. Some donate refreshments including drinks and fruit while others have donated pizza and rolls. Another sponsor provided funds for the awards or has provided the awards themselves. There are several types of stores, such as a hardware or gift store, that might be willing to provide the awards. Just about all the smaller expense items can be covered through small sponsors.

Another idea is to ask for sponsorship of the different categories. For example, one store was the sponsor of the Clydesdale division and another gave money for the Masters and another for the walkers.

The question most sponsors, no matter how small they may be, will ask is..."What's in it for me?" Here are some of the answers. The sponsor will be listed in the race brochure or poster. The major sponsors are listed in race ad for the magazine and many times logos are also shown. Some races have their own customized banners made with sponsors listed. In case the sponsor is dropped the banner can be altered to remove old names and add new ones. Another excellent place for sponsors names and logos is the online results. In addition, to this list many directors write a letter to the sponsors and volunteers that are published online. The race T-shirt, of course, is the primary location for names and logos of race sponsors. It is better to limit the space on a T-shirt to the major sponsors. However, most of us have seen a list similar to a billboard on the backs of some shirts. Races should also provide sponsors limited numbers of T-shirts depending on the amount of sponsorship. In some cases sponsors will provide volunteers for the race and ask that shirts be given to each of these volunteers.

One approach that seems to be popular is to ask individuals to be sponsors. These individuals do not have to be runners. Some races have set up various amounts ranging from \$25 to \$100. It is

much easier to ask for \$25 than for a major contribution. Here again it is important to advise these individuals what they will receive in return. One race had special colored shirts made with the words "Race Booster Club" on the back. These shirts were given to individuals who gave \$50 or more. Small sponsors will be impressed to see their name on a brochure and in the results book.

Small town races seem to have the advantage over the larger cities due mainly to their close-knit nature. Consequently, it may be easier to round up a group of the smaller sponsors. After seeing their friends become a sponsor many others will follow suit. Make a list of companies and individuals that you and persons on your committee could ask to be a sponsor. The best approach is face-to-face with a follow-up letter listing the benefits of the race including all the basic stuff such as health, fitness, fun, participation and so forth. Additionally, list what each sponsor will get in return. Be sure to point out the charity or non-profit which the race benefits since this may be especially important to individuals.

By using both approaches you may be more successful. You may want to ask specific individuals on your committees that have a knack for this sort of thing, to do the asking. Naturally, it is better to do this well in advance of your race.

Establishing a tradition is important by getting off on the right foot. Some directors are of the opinion that the first race should be very low budget just to see what happens. Consequently, many important items are omitted. A tradition cannot be established with a bad first impression. There is nothing like word-of-mouth. If runners and walkers like what they see the first time, the word will spread. Conversely, runners and walkers have a way of bad-mouthing a race if it does not go according to plan. Low budget does not have to mean low quality. Key sponsors will help you get off on the right foot and getting off on the right foot will help you recruit key sponsors the next year.