

8 COMMERCIAL SPONSORSHIP AND THE MEDIA

Paul Deegan

Sponsorship can be found everywhere in modern society. From television dramas to professional sport, many commercial companies are prepared to invest money in order to align their product or services with those individuals or organisations that can deliver exposure to the public. It is no different with expeditions. If you can offer primetime television coverage, front cover news stories and an audience of millions, you will have little trouble in persuading one or more sponsors to underwrite the cost of your expedition.

The problem is that, in the 21st century, expeditions do not usually command this level of attention. So it is vital to think realistically about the amount of exposure that your expedition can generate, and then track down a sponsor who wants the type and level of publicity that you are able to offer.

WHICH COMES FIRST: SPONSORSHIP OR PUBLICITY?

The advantage of securing publicity before you chase sponsorship is that you will be able to demonstrate your commercial value to the companies that you decide to approach. The advantage of gaining sponsorship before you announce your plans to the public is that your sponsor will be able to coordinate your publicity campaign and ensure that their brand is aligned with your expedition from the outset. It is worth bearing in mind that, for every £1 a sponsor gives to an expedition, it usually spends the same amount announcing its support for the project to the world.

Given that publicity and sponsorship are difficult things to obtain, my approach is always to go after both simultaneously.

Sponsorship

Pros and cons of sponsorship versus self-funding

Although it is true that a sponsor who underwrites the cost of the expedition

COMMERCIAL SPONSORSHIP AND THE MEDIA

removes at a stroke the threat of financial debt, there can be a heavy price to pay in other ways. To begin with, you will have to make commitments to your sponsor. These might include public appearances, lectures, interviews, regular updates from the field and product endorsement, as well as returning with high-quality photography and video footage for the media. This can all sound very exciting. But promises made in the warmth of a city centre boardroom can be harder to keep during the expedition when you are attempting to concentrate on ambitious scientific or adventurous objectives, not to mention at the end of the venture when you return to full-time study or employment.

Some friends of mine who have experienced life on a sponsored expedition now choose to raise the money for their expeditions through doing overtime at work. Their argument is that this kind of paid employment is guaranteed to generate the necessary money for their expeditions, whereas weeks or even months of fundraising activities often fail to generate a single penny.

Of course, if your expedition budget is so great that months or even years of employment would fail to generate sufficient funding for it, you might have no choice but to chase potential sponsors, or scale down your ambitions so that you are able to pay for it yourself.

Other expeditions strike a balance between these two extremes by paying for some of the expedition out of their own pockets, while attempting to raise the remainder of the money through sponsorship. Indeed, many would-be sponsors want to see some financial commitment from individual members before assigning their own finances to the project.

Types of sponsorship

Having made the decision to go after sponsorship, it is important to decide how much you need and what it is going to be used for. If some of your finances are going to be spent on clothing and kit, it might be easier to approach outdoor equipment manufacturers for product support. Not only are goods always easier to acquire than hard cash, but also the overall amount of money required for the expedition will be reduced. The same approach can be used with many other essential items on your budget, including flights, fuel and food. By employing this tactic successfully, the outstanding balance could end up being small enough to be covered with grants and small contributions from individual team members.

Your expedition's unique selling point

It will come as no surprise that many expeditions look for sponsorship, but few are rewarded. So decide early on what makes your expedition stand out from any other venture. Is it the place you are visiting, the people involved, the science you hope to achieve or the mountain you intend to climb? Whatever your unique selling point (USP), learn how to communicate this to potential sponsors in under 30 seconds

EXPEDITION HANDBOOK

over the telephone, or in two or three sentences on paper. Your USP is the hook that you will use to catch your sponsor.

Approaching potential sponsors

Many expeditions spend a great deal of time, effort and money in designing and printing glossy publicity material which describes the expedition's objectives, extols the merits of the team members, and waxes lyrical about the benefits to sponsors of aligning their name and product with the project. Most of this publicity material is then sent to dozens of managing directors with a letter (on expensive headed paper) that begins, "Dear Sir/Madam". The vast majority of this publicity material is duly thrown away by company secretaries, because it is seen by them as being a "round robin" letter, addressed to nobody in particular. Unsurprisingly, the expedition website that is heavily touted in the brochure is hardly ever visited.

Rather than adopting this scatter-gun approach, why not think carefully about which companies might see the greatest advantage in your endeavours? One approach is to draw up a list of a couple of dozen appropriate companies, and then call up to find the name of the person (normally the managing or marketing director) to whom your letter should be sent. Another – even more profitable – technique is to gather all the team members together for a meeting during which a list is made of personal contacts at various local and national companies. You might think that you don't have any contacts, but your immediate and extended family might.

One word of caution: do not underestimate the amount of time that sponsorship work takes up. It's not surprising that many expedition leaders arrive at the airport at the start of the expedition looking tired and worn out.

Different types of return for sponsors

The only expeditions that the public usually gets to hear about are high-profile adventurous projects. However, other types of expedition do attract sponsorship. For example, some companies look for internal rather than external publicity: they might want to use your expedition as a vehicle of focus for employees, or as a test bed for a new piece of equipment. Other organisations might want to raise their profile within your university campus or local area. So just because your expedition is not planning to ascend a hitherto unclimbed mountain, don't lose heart.

Retaining control of your expedition

It can be very easy for a sponsor deliberately or unwittingly to hijack an expedition, and for the leader to allow this to happen for fear of losing his or her benefactor. The hijacking might be visual, with the sponsor asking for each item of clothing to be branded with five or six badges rather than just one. Or the hijacking can be more physical, with members of staff flying into base camp and asking for a tour of the area just as team members are preparing themselves for a hazardous phase of the project.

COMMERCIAL SPONSORSHIP AND THE MEDIA

Try to decide early on how much ownership of the expedition you are prepared to hand over to a sponsor in return for the support that they are offering.

The importance of “thank you”

In addition to delivering on all the agreements made with the sponsor, the expedition leader who wishes to receive funding for future ventures will go out of his or her way to ensure that the sponsor's expectations are exceeded wherever possible. This tactic of under-promising and over-delivering is infinitely preferable to making promises (such as guaranteeing summit photographs with the company's banner), which for obvious reasons cannot always be kept.

Publicity

Pros and cons of attracting publicity

As with sponsorship, publicity can be a double-edged sword. For the expedition leader looking in from the outside, the world of television, radio and newspapers can look very glamorous. The reality is quite different. News-gathering organisations are enormous machines, capable of reducing the most important aspects of your project to a sound bite, and focusing instead on the more light-hearted aspects of your trip, such as ablutions and physical relationships between individual team members. It is also worth bearing in mind from the outset that the greatest amount of media attention you are likely to generate is if something goes wrong during the expedition. Then you might find media interest to be intrusive.

That said, reputable media companies are more likely to treat your expedition with the respect that it deserves, and seek to inform and educate (rather than titillate) their audiences. If you enjoy communicating your experiences to the public, the media are perhaps the most powerful tool for spreading the word of your intentions before departure, and the results of your hard work both during and at the end of the project. Media coverage will also make your expedition a very attractive proposition to potential sponsors.

Of course, it is better to whisper before departure and shout loudly on your return: more than one expedition has set off surrounded by plenty of hype, only to fail to achieve its objective and return with egg not only on its face, but also on that of its unhappy and embarrassed sponsor.

Start small, think big

It is unlikely that an inexperienced expedition team is going to announce its plans to the world at large and be immediately picked up by national or international news organisations. It is worth remembering that the majority of experienced expedition leaders began their media careers by contacting local newspapers and local radio stations.

EXPEDITION HANDBOOK

As well as enjoying a relatively high level of coverage with regional media, the forward-thinking expedition leader will realise that this platform provides an opportunity to learn how to be interviewed. The first time that I did a piece to camera on national television news, I gave silent thanks that I had been interviewed before on a lower-profile programme. I felt the same way when being interviewed on national radio for the first time. For further advice on sound recording and radio broadcasts, see Chapter 37.

Local newspapers and radio are rarely interested in people who do not either live or work in their catchment area. However, if your team members come from different parts of the country, you will greatly increase the number of media outlets available to you.

It is worth bearing in mind that many of the stories that are reported on by the national media are picked up by researchers who trawl through local news stories. That's not to say that you should not bother contacting the national media directly; just don't forget the local news organisations along the way.

Choose the most appropriate stories for different types of media

Think carefully about the stories that you have to offer, and which types of media are most likely to be interested. For instance, a local newspaper will probably want the story of the local climber who has named an unclimbed peak after his grandmother. By contrast, a national television news programme might be more excited about the fact that the same expedition has returned with video footage of a previously unseen mountain range. By generating several newsworthy stories for the media during the life of the expedition, you will be giving producers and editors every opportunity to continue covering your project.

The importance of a well-written press release

A press release is the time-honoured method of communicating a story to the media. By producing a well-written press release, you will be letting the journalist who reads it know that you have an understanding of what they are looking for in a story. The ideal press release will fit on to one side of A4 paper, be double spaced (to allow the journalist to write between the lines), and be sent to a named individual at the news organisation that you are contacting. An example of a successful press release is included in Appendix 7.

What editors and producers look for in photographs and video

When you return from your expedition, one of the first things that the media will ask for is photographs and video footage. Without these, the chance of obtaining post-expedition publicity will be very much reduced. Photographs should be clear, sharp and well exposed. Transparencies (slides) are infinitely preferable to negatives (prints). Always send professionally made duplicates rather than your precious originals.

COMMERCIAL SPONSORSHIP AND THE MEDIA

When it comes to video, try to keep it simple. Straightforward shots of landscapes and events, with plenty of close-ups of people, are much more usable than footage riddled with pans, zooms and jazzy effects. It is also worth bearing in mind that footage shot on a three-chip digital camcorder will produce a quality of image acceptable to most broadcasters. Footage shot on a single chip digital or analogue camcorder will be used only if the subject matter is truly outstanding or unique. For further advice on video and film-making, see Chapter 38.

Pick the best time to release your stories

Timing is everything. If you announce your expedition on the day that England is playing Germany in the World Cup do not be surprised if you receive zero coverage. Although a gripping news story can break at any time and push your expedition off the schedule, you can at least avoid all the planned events, from celebrity marriages to local elections.

Persuading the media to run with your story

This is something of a black art: many expeditions claim that they cannot even get hold of a journalist to listen to their story. To get your expedition in the public eye, the first step to take is to put yourself in the shoes of the person to whom you want to speak. Journalists and editors are constantly bombarded with stories. An expedition that is going to study weather patterns in the Himalayas will come a poor second to a famous footballer being injured weeks before the World Cup, or a government minister being accused of misleading the public. However, an expedition that is going to the world's highest mountain range in order to try to find out if changes in the weather are responsible for annual floods that threaten the lives of millions of people is more likely to entice the journalist into running the story. For further advice on writing for magazines, see Chapter 35.

The next thing to consider is the appropriate time to contact the person to whom you wish to speak. In the case of a monthly magazine, telephone to ask the receptionist which day the publication goes to press, and then call the editor or journalist the week after this date when the office is less frenetic. In the case of a breakfast television programme, fax in your press release on the afternoon before the day you wish to appear, or contact the advance planning department a week or two before the official release of the story. The department will then file your press release for consideration under the relevant day's schedule.

Useful notes for interviewees

OK, so you have managed to get your press release under the nose of the relevant person in one of the news-gathering organisations, and they now wish to interview you. In the case of the print media, this will probably be done over the telephone. Remember that the journalist probably knows next to nothing about where you are

EXPEDITION HANDBOOK

going or what you are trying to achieve, so try to get over just a few key facts that can be understood easily. The journalist does not want to hear your life story. And don't get too upset if, when you see the printed story, it is very short, incorrect or both.

On television, if the interviewer is in the studio, look at him or her rather than at the camera. If the interviewer is not present, you will need to focus on the camera lens. This can feel very strange: the secret is never to stop looking into the lens. (It's worth noting that individuals who glance away while being interviewed to camera are often deemed by the viewing public as being untrustworthy – watch people who do this being interviewed on the television news and you'll see what I mean.)

In all interviews, keep your answers shorter rather than longer. At the same time, avoid answering with just "Yes" and "No" because this is extremely boring. Finally, if you are the expedition leader but do not want to be interviewed, ask the team if anyone else would rather be interviewed and make that individual the expedition spokesperson.

A final tip: a single mention of one sponsor – included as part of an answer to a question – is usually ignored by the media. If you try to mention more than one sponsor in each interview, don't be surprised if your story is dropped.

CONCLUSION

Sponsorship and publicity are viewed by some people as being essential components of a successful expedition. Nothing could be further from the truth. A great deal of time and effort – that could otherwise be spent preparing for the venture or earning the money to pay for it – will need to be invested if an expedition is to attract any form of sponsorship or publicity.

That said, sponsorship does exist for the expedition team that has the tenacity, drive and determination to find it. Furthermore, by persuading the media to cover your expedition, you will greatly increase the chance of securing sponsorship for your project. Good luck!