

Tips for Finding and Caring for Team Sponsors

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It goes without saying that every high school kid likes to be a “sponsored” rider. However, the reality is that getting sponsorship for a cycling team is not an easy task. While we like to believe that the top cyclists in the country are living large and have huge assortments of bikes and equipment to choose from, the reality is that only a very small number of cyclists are sponsored at a level that they can afford to buy a house and have a life off their bike. The sad fact is that most mountain bikers are barely making a living be a “pro” and only a small number of total cyclists are making a salary; most of these riders are road cyclists as well.

However, do NOT let this stop you from seeking sponsorship for your high school team. My experience has shown that companies are very interested in youth sports and your team can do quite well in securing sponsors. Below are some tips from my experience as well as suggestions from a few of the companies and athletes I know.

Identify Potential Sponsors: First, start with your team members. Ask everyone on the team if their families own a business or if the parents work for a local company that may be interested in sponsoring the team. Second, open the phone book and your rolodex and think of everyone you know that may be a good contact. Build a list of individuals and firms that you want to pursue. Think broadly as you do not want to limit yourself at this point. Have kids search the Internet and look for cycling-related companies that have online sponsorship applications. Ask your team, what types of businesses do they want to be associated with? Of course, everyone will want a bike shop and some cool bike industry companies, but what about a couple local restaurants, doctors or lawyers, office supply stores, etc?

Develop Proposal: What is it that you are offering the sponsor? Develop a concise list of what you are going to provide in exchange for their sponsorship. Options include, but are not limited to: logo placement on the jersey/shorts, logo and product description on the team website, distribution of samples or literature from the sponsor at events and/or to team families and friends, photographs of kids using sponsor’s items for marketing purposes, etc.

Also, what is it you are asking for from sponsors? Are you seeking product donation, services to be rendered or financial support? Depending on where you are located, your asking price will vary. For the Berkeley High Team, we start the conversation by asking for \$500 in cash or in-kind contributions. Be flexible and ask sponsors what they would like from your team. Your proposal should be a document that is short and to the point. Include photos of the kids and their families and highlight what makes the team special and the benefits the program is providing to the kids. Entice the sponsor want to be part of what is happening!

Soliciting sponsorships: If you're cold calling, make sure you know something more about the company than what they sell. Make sure to customize the sponsorship application as much as possible. Take the time to find out if there is a sponsorship coordinator and what his or her name is. Be patient when waiting for a reply. Following up is fine especially if you're on a deadline, but companies get so many requests that it honestly takes a good bit of time to go through them. Some cycling companies usually ask for around 60 days before they answer.

Having connections helps too. If you have a shop guy who already has a relationship with you and can vouch for the team or the person, that's a plus. According to Todd Wells (highly sponsored Olympian), “the best way to get a sponsor is to develop a relationship with the people you are asking for stuff. It's easier to say "No" to someone you don't know. Networking is key.”

Be sure to give yourself plenty of time to seek the sponsors and to negotiate with them. I am seeking sponsors year-around and really start hard during the summer. Ask team families to begin working with you over the summer and be sure to determine when your deadline is for the jersey order as this will drive when you need to have sponsor's logos in hand. If you have a website, be sure to include the sponsor's logo and information on the site.

Managing the Sponsor: Once you receive a commitment from a sponsor, put it in writing! Send them a thank you letter and spell out exactly what you providing them and vice-versa. If the sponsor is providing discounted purchases of their product, place your order with sufficient lead time and be organized. Do not send multiple orders for a number of small items. Consolidate orders and pay with one credit card. Whenever communicating with a sponsor, be pleasant and thankful.

Provide Timely Updates and Feedback: I have heard from multiple companies that they want to hear from their riders! As one marketing manager informed me "We'd like to see your results. I really like to get pictures of the team using my product. Not only can I use them for promo, it shows that my investment is actually being put to good use." To this end, I write a summary after each race and send both an email and a few choice photos to each sponsor.

Again, Todd Wells provides solid advice:

"As far as keeping the sponsor happy, being a good role model for their brand and products are obvious. I write a race report after each event and send it out to all my sponsors. It's short, less than 1 page and gives my view of the race. I talk more about the feel of the event than the blow by blow of the race. It gives a different perspective from the race report you can read online. You could have a different kid write a race report after each race and send it to your sponsors. You could even include a picture of the kid writing the report."

Be sure to let sponsors know how their products are working. Kids are tough testers of products and I like to know if we are experiencing problems or difficulties with their products. Be courteous and respectful when doing this as you are not complaining, but rather helping them refine their product to make it better. Be sure kids never talk trash about a sponsor. Bike parts break occasionally, but a kid should never say a component or item that was provided to the team "sucks".

Appreciate the Sponsor: At the end of each season, I send a color photo of the team as well as a thank you letter to the sponsor. The letter should be signed by all the kids on the team and, if you can, send a pair of socks, t-shirt, or something as a symbol of your appreciation. For sponsors who have provided a significant contribution, I find out the size of my contact and get them a jersey (if they are a cyclist). Ask them if they are interested in renewing their sponsorship for the next season and what, if anything, your team could do differently to help them.

Note: Please provide additional feedback and suggestions for how to improve this document to Austin McNerny at coachbobo@gmail.com.