

 The Nonprofit Partnership

★ **CREATING A** ★

STELLAR

SPONSORSHIP PROSPECTUS

ERIN YATES

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A WORD ABOUT EVENTS

Events: every organization has one.

In a lot of ways, events are great. They can be excellent [friend-raisers](#). They can help get the word out about your mission. And while they're a lot of work, at the end of the day, they're conceptually straightforward: bring in enough money to cover the cost of the event and still have some left over. Easy-peasy!

But events are not the most effective or efficient fundraising tools. In his book *Fundraising Fundamentals: A Guide to Annual Giving for Professionals and Volunteers*, James Greenfield [writes](#) that organizations can reasonably expect to spend fifty cents to raise a dollar with events, compared to ten to twenty cents with capital campaigns and twenty to twenty-five cents with direct mail renewals. Going by these numbers, it's easy to see why some people argue that events aren't the best possible use of your organization's resources.

Don't worry, you don't have to ditch your signature event. There's good news: corporate sponsorships can help you increase your ROI. And how do you sell sponsorships? With a stellar sponsorship prospectus!

WHAT'S A PROSPECTUS?

At its most basic, a prospectus is a document that lays out all of the information someone needs to know in order to make a decision about whether they want in on an opportunity.

If you didn't find yourself daydreaming about dinner during your organization's 403(b) meeting (or if you manage your own investments at home—kudos to you), prospectus is likely a familiar word. In the context of investing, a prospectus is a document that *prospective* investors receive. It contains detailed data about an investment, including not only information on the investment itself, like how many shares are available and how the investment has performed in the past, but also information on the firm offering the investment.

The data in an investment prospectus is included in order to give its reader, the prospective investor, an idea of whether or not the investment fits within their overall investment strategy and whether or not, based on the information available, it will meet their needs.

The charts, graphs, and data tables included in a prospectus that demonstrate the investment's past performance do a good job of demonstrating where the investment has been. But we can't see the future, and as any financial professional will tell you, past performance is not an indicator of future success. That's why investment prospectuses also include information about the firm that offers the prospectus; they want to make potential investors feel at ease that, due to circumstances beyond anyone's control, they can't always expect excellent returns every year, but under the company's

expert management, they can expect the best possible result in a given situation. In other words, the company can make the best out of a less than ideal situation; the investor's money will be in good hands.

SO WHAT'S A SPONSORSHIP PROSPECTUS?

Your sponsorship prospectus will borrow some of the language, a little of the formatting, and a lot of the spirit of an investment prospectus.

Just like an investment prospectus, a sponsorship prospectus should communicate three key things:

- Details about the opportunity (this is where we are and this is what we have to offer)
- Historical data about the opportunity (this is where we've been and here are the numbers to prove it)
- Information about the organization providing the opportunity (you can trust us—we know where we're going)

With this in a mind, a good sponsorship prospectus should:

- Lay out everything a potential sponsor needs to know to decide whether they want in
- Demonstrate that your organization is trustworthy and legitimate
- Place numbers and deliverables front and center (using visual aids when appropriate)
- Emphasize the positive results of participation for the company



A sponsorship prospectus is different than your usual fundraising collateral. This is because your objective, your audience, and your audience's objectives are all different. As such, some of the fundraising writing "musts" and narrative techniques you may see at work in your case for support or a typical appeal letter are going to be absent, partly-there, or subverted. And that's okay!

Unlike a typical appeal, your prospectus will emphasize the business case for supporting your event and your organization. Placed side-by-side next to your typical appeal, which likely features detailed, heart-rending storytelling, it's going to feel cold and maybe even a little boring.

Why emphasize the business case, you ask? To be frank, that's where the money is.

When you're seeking corporate support in the form of event sponsorships, you don't want to limit yourself to companies that have an investment in your mission, because while many companies truly believe in corporate social responsibility and want to give back to the causes they care about and the communities they're in, just as many simply want exposure and the halo effect that comes

with supporting nonprofits. You need to focus on the ways companies are making decisions, and that means relying on the strength of your business case, rather than on goodwill alone.

That's not to say that you should check your mission at the door. You still need to include parts of your public-facing appeal in your sponsorship prospectus. (This is partly to give your reader a better idea of what your organization does and partly to catch those people who may be on the fence on the dollars-and-cents side but *can* be convinced to participate because they love your mission.) It's just that you can't lead with a story about all of the lizards and snakes at your reptile rescue that have found their forever homes as you might in an appeal. That story won't appeal to the cat-loving company CEO and it doesn't demonstrate how sponsoring their event will lead to positive business outcomes for their company.



Another way in which your prospectus is going to be unlike your other fundraising collateral is that it's going to be long. Well, longer.

You have a lot of compelling information to share with your reader—it's not practical to try to cram it into a trifold brochure. And you'd be doing your organization, your event, and your reader's eyes a disservice by trying to do so.

But long doesn't mean needlessly dense or unreadable. Instead, to combat shrinking attention spans—and your reader's lack of deep investment in really reading your prospectus, most likely—**your prospectus needs to operate on two levels simultaneously: readers should be able to skim and scan the document to get a feel for the content and its central argument (that this is an event worth investing in!) and then be wowed a second time when, having been sufficiently convinced by their skimming and scanning that a deeper dive is worth their time, they go back to read it cover-to-cover.**

You can accomplish this in a handful of different ways. Judicious use of bolding, underlining, and italics can be useful to draw attention to select words and sentences. But you don't want to overwhelm your reader. Not everything can be worthy of emphasis and too much will quickly fatigue your reader and make you, the author, appear unhinged. (See also: multiple exclamation points in succession, abuse of caps lock, increasing font size for dramatic effect in an otherwise normal paragraph.)

Another technique is to use a callout box or a sidebar to isolate and emphasize a section by setting it apart from the rest of the text visually, without bolding, underlining, or italicizing.

MOTIVATIONS FOR CORPORATE GIVING

There are two main reasons a company may want to sponsor your event. These reasons are fairly straightforward, so we'll touch upon them only briefly here.

The first reason is **brand awareness**. This is the same reason companies buy billboards, run commercials, and hand out drink Koozies at street festivals. People can't purchase a company's goods or services if they don't know they exist.

A company might want to sponsor your event as a part of its marketing strategy for a given geographical area, or it may want to reach the audience your event draws. Whichever the case, there doesn't always need to be an affinity between the company's offerings and your organization's mission—though that's always a happy bonus.

A second, closely related reason is **positive brand reputation**. When a company sponsors a nonprofit's event, they're getting their name out there while also demonstrating their commitment to corporate social responsibility. It's a way of saying to consumers, "Look! We're the good guys!" They want to be known *and* liked.

We see an attempt at achieving positive brand reputation through corporate social responsibility at work in Subaru's Share the Love event, wherein \$250 dollars from the sale of each new vehicle is donated to one of a handful of preselected nonprofits. The marketing benefits of this event extend far beyond the group of car buyers that purchase cars during this promotion; Subaru widely advertises this event so that even people with no intention of purchasing a car any time soon will remember that Subaru is the nice car company when they do go to purchase a car in the future.

This is all to say: you'll want to appeal to companies' motivations by emphasizing the quantity of people that will attend your event, receive invitations, or see ads for it (brand awareness) and the halo effect the company will enjoy when they become a sponsor (positive brand reputation).

KEY ELEMENTS OF A SPONSORSHIP PROSPECTUS

No two events are identical, so their prospectuses shouldn't be, either.

What's in each prospectus will vary. Your prospectus might have more sections than are outlined here, or it may have fewer. If a given element is not applicable to your event, don't feel pressured to include it. Use your discretion; take what you need and leave the rest.

COVER

A successful cover announces what's in your prospectus and makes the who/what/when/where of your event immediately apparent.

“PROSPECTUS”

Your cover should include the word “prospectus.” If you find this word too obnoxious, you're free to substitute with a demure “partnership opportunities” or a blunt “sponsorship opportunities.” But no matter the words you choose, it should be immediately clear that this document is meant for corporate partners, rather than attendees or volunteers.

WHO: YOUR ORGANIZATION'S NAME AND LOGO

There should be absolutely zero question about who is hosting your event. Your organization's brand identity should be woven throughout your document. This starts with the cover.

WHAT: YOUR EVENT NAME

Second to “prospectus” (or your preferred alternative), this is the most important information to share on your cover. If your event is long-running and well-loved, your reader may already have a positive relationship with your event – if so, simply stating the event name will make the rest of your work much, much easier. If they aren't aware of your event, this is their first clue as to the who/what part of the equation.

If for some reason your event has an ambiguous or vague name, or if the event's name doesn't do justice to the content of the event, an elucidating tagline or single-sentence summary should be used beneath the event's name. For example, an event called "20 under 20" conjures up images of young people awkwardly shaking hands and accepting awards at some kind of banquet. But if that's not what your event will be, a summary is in order: "Watch 20 of our city's most promising young people race to complete a 19 mile course in below-freezing temperatures." With this summary, it's clear that you're recognizing up-and-comers, as the title suggests, but it also lets your reader know that's not all they can expect.

WHEN: YOUR EVENT DATE, INCLUDING YEAR

People do not read carefully. You will want to put your event date in as many locations as are logical in order to drive home this important piece of information.

You should also take special care to include the year in the event date. What's true of your "Halloween 2009" photo album on Facebook is true of your prospectus: [what you put on the internet stays there forever](#). (Mostly.) Even if you've hidden that content on your website or deleted it from your CMS, it can still live on, indexed by a third party. Avoid confusion and include the year.

WHERE: YOUR EVENT LOCATION, INCLUDING CITY

You'll likely be targeting some larger companies. While it's clear to someone who lives and works in the Erie area where the Bayfront Convention Center is, it's just a string of meaningless words to someone at a company headquartered in Allentown or New York City. Don't make them Google your venue—you want to make saying yes as easy as possible, and that starts with providing context as needed. Add event location, including the city. You can even include the full address, if you're interested.

OVERVIEW

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In this section, you should include some brief background information on your organization, its mission, and its history, plus the event, its format, its purpose, and its history. No need to draft 2,000 words about every single Executive Director you've ever had; you just want to make sure that someone that isn't familiar with your organization and your event will walk away with an

understanding of what you do and the purpose of your event. If you already have a case for support, you can draw from that to address these topics.

In addition to communicating how worthy of support your event is, this information will also make it clear that your organization is trustworthy and legitimate. You want your sponsors to rest easy knowing that your organization won't abscond with their sponsorship payments or dissolve before the event.

You should also include basic details about the event, including the number of attendees you expect (which you'll address in earnest in the audience information section), the format of the event, and any other relevant information. Again, you want to work under the assumption that your reader has never heard of your event before, then include the information they'd need to get an idea of what the event is like.

In your overview, you should also include the basic event information on who/what/when/where again—remember, people don't read carefully.

CONTACT

You should also add one organizational contact that people can reach out to. Include their name, title, and contact information. This person will field all prospectus-related questions. (This means they should study up on the details of each sponsorship package and have a copy close at hand to refer to during calls. The last thing you want is the prospective sponsor to speak to someone who doesn't seem to know what they're talking about!)

On the off chance that your reader comes up with a question that isn't already addressed in your *very* thorough and carefully composed prospectus, they'll know exactly who to reach out to. Adding a contact also helps reinforce the trustworthiness of your organization.

ATTENDEE INFORMATION

Attendee information is an extremely important part of your prospectus. Companies need to know how many people they can reach at your event and what kinds of people they'll reach in order to make a decision about whether or not they want to participate.

Since you can't see the future, you can't predict who will come to an event that you haven't held yet. That's why you should include information about last year's attendees. In lieu of a crystal ball, this is the best way for prospective sponsors to get an idea of the kinds of people that may attend your event and in what numbers.

As mentioned previously, **you'll want to draw special attention to the number of attendees you expect.** At the very least, you should include information about last year's number of attendees, then give your estimate for this year's number and explain the difference, if there is one. For example, if your event had 120 attendees last year but you expect 240 this year, you need to fill in the missing pieces for your reader by explaining that you've tripled your advertising budget and added a full-time event staff person. You can also include a data that shows attendance numbers over 3, 5, or more years to communicate that your event has been growing steadily over time in order to contextualize your estimate.

Don't worry too much about providing a perfect estimate. The vast majority of sponsors will understand if you expect 450 attendees and only end up with 400. Just be sure that your estimate is in good faith and based in reality – exaggerating or artificially inflating your projected attendance will only earn you a tarnished reputation.

If your attendance numbers do fall short of your projection, you'll have a chance to explain yourself in your sponsorship fulfillment report. **If you're not already sharing sponsorship fulfillment reports after your event, start today!** [This](#) short summary of key elements is a great place to start, but you should take a deep dive into the vast array of information available online to get a strong feel for what a good fulfillment report includes. (And keep your eyes peeled for a sponsorship fulfillment report eBook, coming soon!)

You'll also want to describe your attendees' attributes using data from last year. You can start by describing your attendees' relationship to your event and your cause, insofar as these help to characterize them as prospective customers or consumers. For example, if you're hosting a gala to benefit your reptile rescue, some of your attendees – may have adopted a lizard or snake from your center. Raid your CRM for relevant data, then think about what it could mean for prospective sponsors. In the reptile center example, the information that 66% of attendees have adopted some kind of scaly pet from the rescue would be very relevant to pet supply stores, since reptile owners are a subsection of their target demographic, pet owners.

Then you can move on to describing your attendees more generally, based on the information you collected during registration and the information about them you may have already had on file.

What you can say about your attendees will depend on the kind of event you're hosting and the information you collect. If you're hosting a reptile race to benefit your reptile rescue at the local park where people can drop by without registering, you won't have the same kind of attendee information to share, so you'll need to focus on attendee numbers, instead.

Basic demographic information you may want to share could include age, gender identity, and location.

WHAT IF MY EVENT IS BRAND SPANKING NEW?

You can still create a prospectus. Your attendee information will just look a little different. You'll have to place greater emphasis on the number of attendees you expect and make educated inferences where you can since you don't have the benefit of historical information.

If you're worried you don't have enough information to be able to paint a vivid picture of the kinds of people that attend your event, you can use tools like the Census and American Community Survey to talk about your attendees based on common data points like cities and ZIP codes, which you'd pull from information they provide at registration or information you have about them in your CRM. For example, you can sort your attendees by ZIP code, then look up the median household income for that ZIP code using the [Census Bureau's Community Facts tool](#). Then, using this information, you can say, *half of our attendees reside in the 16506 ZIP code, where the median annual household income is \$xx,xxx.*

If you feel stuck or unsure about what attendee information to include, don't panic. We're lucky enough to have been born in the age of Google. Don't feel ashamed about tapping out a quick search along the lines of "event sponsor brochure" (more common than "prospectus," even though prospectus is the superior nomenclature) to see what the competition—or rather, your wonderful peer organizations—are up to. Don't feel like you need to reinvent the wheel.

And in your Googling, be prepared to run across a lot of corporate materials and a lot of prospectuses for conference sponsorships. Even if they're not exactly like your event, you should still look at these examples! While you can't very well provide that same kind of hyper-granular information, such as the percentage of your attendees that have worked in the field of cytotechnology for more than five years, you can still learn a lot from how they present their information and what they choose to include.

PARTICIPATION OPPORTUNITIES

If your attendee information is the bread and butter of your prospectus, your participation opportunities are the meat and potatoes.

Now, this eBook is only about prospectuses, so before we go much further, you should do some reading on corporate sponsorship best practices to see if your program is up to snuff. Or if you're already unsure that your program is as good as it could be, check out the list of questions in the Conclusion of this eBook.

Another note: **you should always offer to customize your sponsorship packages.** You have the power to turn a good fit into a great one and a "maybe" into a "yes" with customization. Whether you add a customized sponsorship package to your lineup alongside your other options or a simple "customization available" clause elsewhere in your document, you need to make your prospects aware that you're ready, willing, and able to work with them to meet their needs.

Now, without further ado, your must-dos for presenting your participation opportunities:

- Sort. Arrange your packages so that they're in some kind of sequential order by dollar value, either ascending or descending. Your reader will have some kind of budget in mind; make sure they can quickly and easily identify the opportunities that are within their price range.

- Separate. Sponsorships should be visually separated from one another and clearly labeled with each package's name and its cost. You want your document to be skimmable and user-friendly—this is a big part of that.
- Elaborate! Don't just say that the Platinum sponsorship includes "signage," say what kind of signage, where it'll be, and when. Only three slots for the Friend of Godzilla sponsorship at the gala to benefit your reptile rescue? Say so. Above all, be clear! You don't want to find yourself explaining unwritten rules (or things you forgot to add to your document) to your prospective sponsor.
- Elaborate some more. If you have quantitative data to share about some of your benefits, you should do so here. If you'll send out a promotional mailer to 500 prospective attendees or place a sponsor thank you on the front page of your website which receives 1,200 unique visitors each month, don't be shy about it—let them know!

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

You've covered the big topics, now it's time to fill in the cracks.

After you've addressed the major questions, you'll want to cover everything a potential sponsor needs to know to decide whether they want in. Relevant items may include:

- A detailed event schedule
- A floor plan of your venue
- A seating chart for an event with assigned seating
- A list of important deadlines
- The terms and conditions of sponsorship
- A Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) section
- A section featuring current sponsors (if you already have some on board for this year's event)
- A section featuring past sponsors

USING YOUR PROSPECTUS

Now that you're utterly convinced of the importance of using a sponsorship prospectus, I have to offer a disclaimer: **your prospectus is only one part of the equation when it comes to selling sponsorships.**

As I mentioned in the Participation Opportunities section, your prospectus is only as good as the sponsorship program it's showcasing. So in order to bring in more sponsors and increase the ROI on your event, you need to make sure you have a rock-solid foundation in place.

That requires that you take a good, hard look at how you've been doing things (or how you plan to do things, if this is new event). Here are a handful of questions to help get the wheels turning:

- Are you issuing sponsorship fulfillment reports?
- Are you surveying sponsors after your event to get their feedback on how things went?
- Are you offering to customize your packages to meet sponsors' needs or offering a "build your own" option?
- Do you have a sponsor stewardship strategy?
- Do you communicate with sponsors between the end of one year's event and the next time you ask for their support?
- Do you have high rates of sponsor retention from year to year?
- Have you reevaluated your pricing structure within the last five years?
- Is there a clear relationship between the each package's price and its attendant benefits?
- Are you clearly communicating the benefits and opportunities that make up each package?

Did you answer yes to all of the questions above? Awesome! More power to you. A prospectus might be the only boost you need to take your sponsorship acquisition to the next level.

But if, after considering these questions, you aren't sure if your sponsorship program is in fighting shape, **email me, Erin Yates, at eyates@yournpp.org to set up a sponsorship program review!**

FURTHER READING

Check out some stellar sponsorship prospectus case studies [here](#).