

10 steps to successful sponsorship for zoos, natural history sites and aquariums in the UK

Introduction

Sponsorship is a viable funding possibility for major zoos and aquariums, which has rarely been fully exploited in the UK. This paper attempts a brief discussion of 10 distinct pieces of thinking required by the successful sponsorship seeker.

Step 1: Define your terms

Commercial sponsorship is *not* philanthropy. Let us immediately also dispose of that other confusing use of the term as in ‘a sponsored bike ride’ or other community fundraising activity which friends are asked to support. *Commercial sponsorship is an activity whereby a commercial interest pays a fee to purchase a defined association with a defined project or property that represents defined positive values and provides access to defined audiences.*

In this context it is especially important to understand that the sponsorship fee has *no necessary relationship to the financial needs of the sponsored organisation or its project.* The sponsor is not *financing you* to carry out the project: they are *paying* for an association with the project.

Step 2. Create a team that understands and is supportive of the sponsorship initiative

Often the most challenging task for the individual responsible is to move their organisation from a focus on *their funding needs* towards a potential corporate supporter’s *business wants*. Once an organisation has decided to seek sponsorship at all, it must, within the context and constraints of its own ethical purpose, put its thinking firmly in the position of that of the sponsor.

Colleagues may initially express entirely valid concerns such as: *“Is there a danger of the organisation becoming over-commercialised? Will our zoo end up pursuing inappropriate projects simply because the funding is there? Will we end up ‘green washing’ companies with poor environmental or ethical records.”* Such issues should not be shrugged away, but rather carefully worked through. Your zoo should arrive at a point where, within an agreed sponsorship policy, the whole team is committed to giving value to the sponsor.

Internal relationships are very bit as important as external ones. It is extremely tempting for the new Development Executive to focus exclusively on the outside world (that is, after all, where all the resource is expected to come from). However it is the *entire* organisation that contracts with a sponsor, and not just the Development office. Thus *intra*-organisational persuasions are as important as *inter*-organisational ones.

Certainly, if the Chief Executive, the Board, the ‘project owner’ (i.e. the relevant curator, estates manager or education officer) colleagues in Marketing and PR (who will deliver many of the promised benefits) are not both fully committed and informed at every stage, the sponsorship process will be very vulnerable.

If these issues are not resolved, if the team is not formed, your organisation should really think twice before embarking on the sponsorship route at all.

Step 3: Carry out a thoroughgoing audit of all you have to offer

You cannot sell your sponsorship property ¹unless you know *all* of its dimensions, all the possible benefits you could offer.

Start with your organisation’s marketing plan to list the constituencies to which you can give access. The more accurately you can *prove* the make up of your zoo’s visitors, the stronger your pitch². In addition to visitors, there will be secondary audiences. Zoos have, for example, generally good relations with the media. You may have especially well defined members and adopters groups or a developed profile in front of business and political decision makers (a strategy you should incidentally pursue for many reasons outside of sponsorship). Perhaps you have relationships with celebrities. Possibly, you can help a sponsor give benefit to their own client groups: staff; future employees; customers; shareholders, etc. Think laterally to list all the constituencies you might offer.

Some further questions will help you ‘tease out’ a portfolio of benefits:

1. What are the positive qualities that an association with your zoo and/ or this particular project might transfer to a sponsor. Education? The happy traditional family experience? Conservation? Civic pride? Perhaps the attributes of a particular animal, or group thereof? Perhaps an alignment with a theme such as flight, water or a part of the world?
2. In how many different contexts might you display the sponsor’s message³?
3. What naming rights could you offer. A building? A newly born animal⁴?
4. Are there opportunities for your organisation to place *your* brand⁵ on *their* product? A reverse of the normal pattern that still transfers your positive association to the sponsor
5. Perhaps the sponsor will be interested in gathering data through your zoo?
6. Can you offer entertainment facilities in association with the sponsorship?
7. Could the sponsor have a temporary special presence on your site?

Be creative in creating a checklist of benefits. It is critical however that you will not be throwing everything at one sponsor. You will not be ‘*giving away your birthright for a mess of pottage*’, but rather creating a tailor made individual package in each case.

Step 4: Where do you find a sponsor? Where do you find out information about sponsors?

Your initial list of prospects should begin to emerge naturally from Step 3 above. Those

companies to whom you have something to offer to in terms of audience and image should then however be cross checked with interests that can actually *afford* to sponsor. Generally, the types of company with the biggest marketing budgets⁶ are:

- Drinks companies
- Fashion companies
- Car manufacturers
- Financial Services
- Telecommunications
- Food stuffs

A number of publications available in good commercial libraries track such data on marketing spend. Remember that is ultimately always a ‘brand’ who might wish to ‘purchase association with your product’, not its parent company as such.

Large companies present in your locality or region may be motivated to sponsor to be seen to feed back into their community. For these purposes, a ‘large’ company is one with a lot of employees (as opposed to measurement by turnover, assets or profitability). A picture of your regional business scene can be built up fast through a patient following of the business pages of your regional paper. Indeed over a period of time the dedicated Development researcher will begin to build up ‘a nose’ for the essential influence structures that underlie the business world. Certain business journals and business associations (CBI, IoD, Chamber of Commerce) will publish list of prominent companies in your area.

Learn quickly to distinguish those key organisations who do have both a respectable budget to support you, and where it is practical to gain access to a decision maker who can actually say ‘yes’ to your proposal.

Finally, networking is *by far* the best way to both gain intelligence on potential sponsors as well as access thereafter. We will deal with the most crucial topic in zoo sponsorship (or *any* element in the zoo’s future development in respect of the external world) under step 5 that follows.

Step 5: Making contacts

The worst possible form of approach is that most frequently used: a ‘cold call’ letter where no previous relationship exists. You need to establish two things before you actually make such an offer in writing. Firstly, the potential sponsor has to be well and positively aware of your organisation. Secondly, you need to have some form of personal relationship with the decision maker or with an intermediary, a ‘door opener’ in some shape or form.

Raise your profile in the business community. Consider taking a presence at business events. Two ways of establishing considerable profile very quickly at such junctures are to distribute a number of complimentary tickets⁷, or to get yourself nominated for one of the very many business award schemes available⁸. If you have the facilities, offer to host meetings of the regional CBI or the larger Chambers of Commerce, thus showcasing your organisation to a

large number of prospects all at once. Ask your PR office to target the business press as well as the mainstream media with zoo stories.

Make friends for your organisation just for the sake of it. Offer special behind the scenes tours for significant business figures on a no-commitment basis. If you can look upon this as a ‘prospecting’ or ‘blue sky’ activity, the sponsorship prospects may in good time begin to present themselves, almost of their own accord.

Above all seek to coalesce around you, a coterie of advisors and advocates from the business world. The author of this article believes that the formation of a business advisory board (an exercise demanding a degree of subtlety) is *the single most important strategic tool*, not only in terms of sponsorship, but in most instances where the long term development of the zoo is dependent on external relationships.

Step 6: The proposal

A proposal (on paper or as a computer presentation) should be considered from the sponsor’s perspective, not your organisation’s, and should contain the following elements:

- A short covering letter
- A description of ‘the fit’ between your property and the brand in terms of attribute
- An analysis of your visitors with as much substantiated detail on demographic and psychographics as available
- A package of benefits drawn from step 3 above and carefully tailored to this particular sponsor

It should of course also contain a description of the property to be sponsored and you will wish to strike the potential sponsor with the excellence with which they might become associated. However please remember, it really is the benefits this association will bring them (‘outputs’), not the excellent innate qualities of your project as such (‘inputs’) that are of interest here. You will need to do good deal of research on the individual sponsor’s needs to shape the proposal to the context of an individual dialogue. A car manufacturer does not have the same market requirements as a financial product concern.

The proposal may be used to gain that initial meeting. However at an early point, it is much more subtle to request an information gathering meeting with a sponsor, at which they talk, and you listen. A better crafted and tailored proposal will result from a negotiation over time.

Step 7: Pricing: the most difficult part of the process

Remember Step 1: the fee you will ask for has *no necessary relationship* with what it will cost you to complete the project. The ‘right’ price, both commercially and ethically, is the highest one you can get!

Also beware of being so desperate to win any finance at all, that you will offer association

with a major project for a negligible fee. ⁹If you are serious about sponsorship, hold out for a serious sponsor. There are three considerations that will help to establish the necessary rock bottom price, the figure beneath which you will walk away from the negotiation.

- What would it cost the sponsor to reach the same audience if they were to use conventional advertising media?
- If the extra sales or leads from your sponsorship are actually measurable¹⁰, the fee can be measured against this
- At what level are similar ‘rival’ sponsorships around the world pegged?

Finally to settle on your ‘walk away’ figure you need to add something for those extra positive, but intangible, values your project brings. This is necessarily subjective, but clearly a sponsor may be willing to pay more for:

- a highly recognisable or prestigious organisational name
- an animal association with obvious appeal to the public
- a project likely to attract lots of media attention

Armed with the walkway figure you can begin your dialogue and try and get intelligence on the final vital and practical element in the pricing mix: the size of the sponsor’s available budget.

Step 8: Negotiating: what to expect from the dialogue and what you need from it.

Decisions within a large organisation always take some time to mature, and a successful deal will probably require 3 or 4 meetings for the win-win deal everyone wants to gradually coalesce. Thus, in principle, you need to leave yourself a lead time of between 6 to 18 months.

Find a way to have a face to face meeting with the person who can say yes, rather than waste your time with people who refer everything upwards. If you find this difficult, ask for the help of your advisers in the business world (see step 4). Business decision makers respond best to those they perceive as their peers.

Listen and be interested in everything the potential sponsor has to tell you about their business environment. Use this intelligence to constantly shape your thinking towards a win-win situation.

You will need to handle a number of rejections before you succeed. When you get a ‘no’, respect this, but try to establish ‘what kind of no’ it is:

- No, not ever..?
- No, not now..?
- No, not this particular project...?
- No, not at this price..?

Elicit from the decision maker what would it actually take to do the deal. If they admit to quite *liking* the project, ask: “*What would it take to make you love the project?* Is there another property that would suit them better.

Once common sense tells you that the shape of an overall agreement has been hammered out, do not be afraid to take the plunge and actually ask for a firm contractual agreement

Step 9: Servicing: under promise and over deliver

In your eagerness to secure sponsorship, do not offer more benefit activity than you can actually guarantee; better to hold something in reserve and delight the sponsor by exceeding your agreement. Perhaps you can add extra surprise value by offering some benefit to a third party organisation that they already support, such as a children's charity or school...?

Whilst still in negotiation carefully cost servicing the sponsorship, including the easily overlooked element of staff time. The zoo or aquarium's chief executive must review and commit before the final deal is signed.

Try to involve all elements of the sponsor's organisation (staff, different departments and senior management), especially any parties not directly involved in the original negotiation, within the celebratory and 'fun' aspects of the sponsorship.

Sponsors are busy people, so make the delivery easy for them, not burdensome. A 'turn key' process, where all they have to do is sign the cheque is, in some ways, ideal for both parties. If the sponsorship is big enough, you may want to actually hire someone to specifically focus on benefit delivery. Certainly one member of zoo staff should be the nominated point of contact to ensure smooth communication.

On a day to day basis, the sponsor may not be aware of all the exploitable angles in terms of the peculiarities of your zoo and its community. Without creating unwelcome work for them, show them the extra buttons they can push to convert their sponsorship into business benefit.

Complete the sponsorship with a full report providing substantiated data on all of the benefits delivered, comprehensive record of media coverage, description of associated events, etc.

Step 10: Renewal and referral

Nothing succeeds like success, and your final report is the trigger to test the water for sponsorship renewal, assuming your property may be regarded as a repeatable proposition¹¹. A continued partnership based on an existing relationship is an easier proposition than starting from scratch looking for a new sponsor. The final report will contain a request for feedback from the sponsor. As a rider to this, you will query areas where you might deliver greater value in the future and where your sponsor's business priorities lie for the year ahead. You will stay in touch with general news issues that affect the sponsor's business environment.

At the renewal point, and throughout the delivery, you will be considering just how wide a range of decision makers you need to influence to win a second bite at the apple. This may now include the sponsor's professional advisers, such as a PR, advertising or marketing

agency. If they have all been properly brought into the picture, the sponsor should have begun to feel a sense of long term 'ownership' of the property.

Problems or negative media attention around your zoo's status and reputation, as well as that of the zoo and aquarium field in general that occur during the sponsorship naturally impact on the chances of renewal and referral. Be proactive in warning sponsors of such difficulties before they feature in the media. Contextualise the issue for them.

If the sponsor is happy with the project, but renewal, for whatever reason, is not on the cards, ask for their help in securing new corporate friends. Their testimonial is worth gold. You may consider asking a senior representative of the company to join your advisory board or even become a trustee. Ask the former sponsor to attend presentations or meetings where the zoo is seeking fresh allies and new profile. A successful past sponsor should basically be merged into the organisation

Concluding remarks

This has been a brief overview of the principles involved in zoo and aquarium sponsorship. Success is not down to luck¹², but science. Certainly sponsorship should be seen as more than a short term funding solution. Partnership between your organisation and its commercial supporter should be holistic and long term. Extra benefits may be sought such as audience development, commercial management expertise, and a gradual and subtle positive evolution in your overall organisational culture.

In a spirit of mild perversity, we conclude with two important caveats to all that has gone before.

This paper has sought to persuade zoos and aquariums to approach sponsorship on a professional, strategic and fully resourced basis. However it is important not to get 'obsessed' with sponsorship. The expressions sponsorship and fundraising are not exact synonyms. The author of this article has been involved in many other means to attract serious external capital into zoos (legacy giving, major gifts, engagement with national and regional government on the economic development agenda). On funding and positioning issues it pays to think widely and to see the big picture.

Secondly, we began with a careful definition of commercial sponsorship to delineate it from philanthropy and other forms of support. However, whilst healthy to base initial expectations on an unambiguous conception, *'once you know the rules, you can begin to break them'*. The fact is, in the real world, sponsorship sometimes does begin to blur into philanthropy. The human primate does not adhere to a strictly logical economic model, and a concern sponsoring rugby may turn out to have rugby enthusiasts at its core; a company aligned with opera may well have an opera loving chief executive. If the personal enthusiasms of a decision maker can be first engaged, the marketing case can often be addressed subsequently.

ENDS

John Regan of John Regan Associates Ltd formerly set up and led the Development department at Chester Zoo where he negotiated a £2 million sponsorship with Jaguar Cars, and initiated and managed the Asian Elephant appeal. His most significant achievement was to develop and over many years implement a strategic partnership with the North West Regional Development Agency, drawing down a six figure sum to plan the development of the Zoo's wider estate.

More recently, on behalf of the Consortium of Charitable Zoos and Aquariums, John Regan Associates Ltd with the support of Ernst & Young plc played a significant role by lobbying through the CBI in successful zoo VAT repayments amounting to some tens of millions of pounds. Subsequently, JRA Ltd produced "The Manifesto for Zoos" developing a new high level dialogue on the role of zoos with the UK Government. JRA Ltd currently acts behalf of the European Association of Zoos and Aquariums, the Zoological Society of London and Twycross Zoo on specific funding and profile raising issues.

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(Footnotes)

¹ Your 'property' could be an exhibit, an educational or conservation programme, a publication, an event, etc

² The UK zoo community is remarkably lacking in data on who actually visits

³ The balance between fully accrediting your sponsor and 'vulgarising' your property is important

⁴ Whilst it is unlikely that any zoo would be happy naming a baby giraffe 'Acme Limited, (!), a sponsor may still value the chance for management, their workforce, or a public competition with their name on it to choose a name from a pre-selected list

⁵ To a degree, 'your brand' might be the particular species in question rather than the name of your organisation. 'Save the Lion' is a stronger brand than 'Leeds Zoo'

⁶ Naturally this pattern fluctuates all the time

⁷ No, you are not just 'giving your gate money away'. The frenetically busy business class probably do not come to your zoo anyway, and a single complimentary ticket will generate 2 or 3 purchased tickets, plus retail and catering sales, plus the repeat visits all available from this highly affluent market of decision makers.

⁸ The very colourful and unusual nature of our leading zoos make them likely to do well in these subjectively judged competitions normally involving rather 'grey' business activities.

⁹ Be especially wary of some PR companies in this context who will try to get the earth from you on behalf of their clients for a token fee.

¹⁰ This will normally only be the case in some redeemable voucher arrangement

¹¹ It is useful to consider the property you have to sell, not as a series of once and for all exhibits, but as 'an event'. The aquarium or zoo is, after all, just that: a year long event that happens every year

¹² except in so far as luck favours the well prepared, the strategically minded and the hard working!