

A Common Sense Guide to PR/Sponsorship and event promotions/marketing¹

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Many books have been written about these topics, but you don't really need a book or a course to learn the basics. I learnt these skills through "on the job" experience while organising activities as a university student. This "encouraging industry support and participation" aspect was part why I was recently recognised with the RAB GOLD Achievement award.

Hopefully sharing some insights I gained along the way is enough to get you started!

PR/Sponsorship

Forms of sponsorship

Sponsorship can take different forms – "in-kind" and monetary. In-kind sponsorship can be in terms of goods (e.g. food, drinks to be consumed during an event you organise), services (e.g. photocopying) and discount (e.g. discount to you as an event organising committee, or discount to members).

Of course monetary sponsorship is better because you are in control of how the money can be used to purchase goods or services, but "in-kind" sponsorship is just as important, and perhaps easier to get in some cases. In fact the catch-cry of someone who "showed me to ropes" to the art of sponsorship-hunting when I was involved in a student club was "Never pay for something if you can help it"!

Rule #1: Think about what you have to offer

While you are relying on the goodness of people's hearts, it is still important to create "value" and offer them something in return. For example, some charities in Australia have actually sent a sheet of personalised address labels with their sponsorship request.

So... the big question is: what can you offer a sponsor? Here are some ideas:

- Differential "status" of sponsorship (bronze, silver, gold, platinum if you wish – the more they sponsor the more they get)
- "Good corporate citizen" image for helping out
- General publicity (their logo on posters, emails)
- Opportunity to present/promote their company/products in front of members
- Other ways to access members (e.g. send out job advertisements on their behalf)
- Certificates of appreciation don't cost too much to print!

Rule #2: Establish rapport and gain trust

It is very important to always keep your eyes open for potential sponsors, because normal networking "soft-selling" is always more effective than cold-calling. In fact Daniel Goleman, the author of *Emotional Intelligence* mentioned a study in the book where the "star performers" among all the engineers in a large company were found to be more effective and efficient not because they were smarter, but because they establish a network of experts who can help them

¹ Adapted from a presentation I delivered in the Western Australian Section training workshop April 2007

before they even need them, so in times of crisis they rarely waste valuable time on unanswered emails or phone calls.

But if you have to cold-call, there are a few tricks to establish rapport:

- Use some small talk to open (e.g. how are they today)
- Ask open questions instead of straight forward yes/no questions. Let people talk about themselves (most people generally like the attention), their products or their company. Showing interest usually leaves a positive impression
- This also gives you valuable info on what they would want that you potentially could offer (e.g. they may be in desperate need of a good story for the “community” section of their annual report!)

Also remember to act and look professional, because quite literally, **you need to convince them to trust you with their money!**

Rule #3: Walk the Walk, Talk the talk

Understanding how typical workplaces operate (this is especially important for students and academics), the pecking order, who calls the shots etc. will help you get to the right people.

Generic faxes and “info@company.com” emails are less likely to get you very far compared to ones with an actual recipient identified. And addressing a letter to a person/name is always better than to a position. So what you can do before making a formal approach to the sponsor is do some research. Call up and ask the receptionist who you should be directing your letter/email/sponsorship proposal to.

Sending emails using ieee.org alias may in some cases look more professional (e.g. compared to emails sent from a hotmail account).

If you don't have a business card (e.g. student branch officers), consider printing IEEE business cards. This is how people in the business world keep contacts so having one makes dealing with you easier for the sponsors.

You can also try to include “Buzz words” and persuasive writing in your proposal (more on this later).

It is also important to keep yourself updated on news and current affairs, know what's the current focus/priority of the company you're approaching.

Rule #4: A door is closed now doesn't mean it'll be forever

If companies choose not to sponsor/participate, it could be for various reasons other than a lack of faith in your activities. Maybe they don't have the budget for now, they're not recruiting so they don't need the peer publicity, or you may have missed an application time frame (larger corporates often have their own sponsorship application programs, with their own forms and deadlines).

It is good practice to treat the effort not as wasted but as general PR, because you are keeping them in the loop and letting them know the good things you do. You can try approaching them again either in a different form (e.g. asked for in-kind rather than monetary sponsorship), or next year.

Events promotion

My intent is to focus less on the mechanics of event promotions but more on how to plan it... Although for the record, these are the different avenues you can promote events:

- Email
- Website

- Posters
- Fliers
- Newsletters
- Pre-lecture talks (applicable to student branches)
- Don't forget to think about cross-promotions with other clubs/societies. If they are concerned about privacy issues, you can send them the content (e.g. electronic flyer) and send to their members on your behalf, and offer to do the same for their events to your members.

Design of promotional materials

Think about what members typically want out of the events you hold and what can you offer. Talk about that in your promotional documents. But don't over-exaggerate your promises, e.g. "opportunity to mingle with employers" as opposed to "we'll help you find a job".

When you're designing the promotional documents:

- Be succinct.
- Be attention-grabbing (e.g. use colours and pictures!)
- Use active voice (this urges the reader to do something!)
- Use positive words
- Persuasive soft-selling writing (more on that later)
- If you have the luxury of time, leave it for a few days before proof-reading it again, and get others to proof-read for you and word-smith it with you!

Ticket pricing "bag of tricks"

Try to differentiate between members and non-members in pricing. Hopefully over the course of the year, members would've made their money back from savings in attending your activities.

Consider offering group discount or buy 10 get one free (this provides incentives for people with a lot of crowd-pulling power to convince more people to come)

Often ticket sales tend to increase massively the day before the event, and this is especially the case for social events - people tend to take their time and only make up their mind last minute. The uncertainty is not good for you as an event organiser. The solution? Consider offering an early bird discount!

Start promoting with enough lead time before the event

It's important to leave enough lead time before the actual event to start promoting/marketing it.

For small events, ideally 2 weeks to a month. For large events, ideally send out a 'teaser' 2 months or more before, with the finalised details promoted again at least a month before. But there is a trade-off: if you promote too far advance, you're risking the "out of sight, out of mind" syndrome. So if necessary, send email reminders!

Conclusion

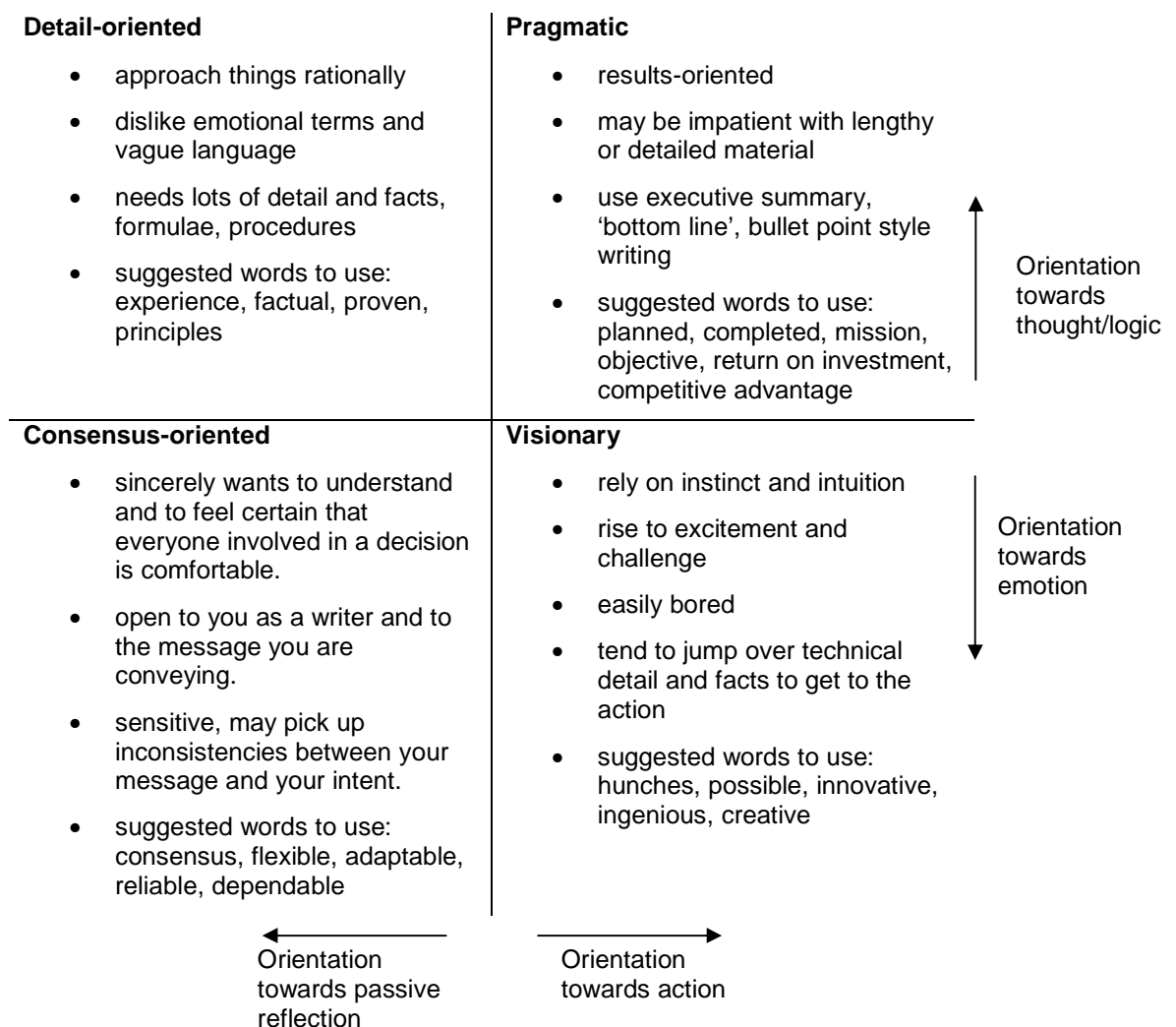
There are two common elements for success between sponsorship and events promotion:

1. Figure out what they want
 - Open communication channels
 - Remember to collect feedback afterwards (whether formal survey or informal verbal comments)
2. Soft-sell what you have to offer

- This involved more than just stating the “bare facts” (which engineers have a tendency to do)
- Use persuasive writing (Ok, finally we’re getting to this very important point…)

Side track: crash course in persuasive writing

Effective persuasion relies on ‘getting inside someone’s head’. Identify the decision maker, his/her needs, motives, and his/her thought processes will help you target your document appropriately. The key characteristics that you need to consider when assessing your audience is **how they like to gather data** and **how they prefer to make decisions**.



Engineers tend to belong to the top two quadrants, but the personality of potential sponsors is anybody’s guess unless you’ve actually met and observe them. So, try to do your research on them. Or if you don’t have the time, at least try to write your proposal to appeal to logic so that a decision to sponsor you should be quite easily justifiable.