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Opinion

Online sponsorship submissions need not be a waste of time

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Submitting sponsorship proposals online is becoming much more common.

The default reason for many companies has become "Due to the heavy volume of proposals, we now require that all submissions are completed at our site ..."

I have been on the receiving end of numerous unsolicited proposals and I am sympathetic with the problem, but why a Web-based solution? Sure, it provides one place to send everyone, and it shouldn't lose anything, but the truth seems most likely to be that sponsorship departments just can't deal with the volume.

I'm not sure the solution isn't worse than the problem. Have you ever tried to submit a proposal for sponsorship online? Someone has to develop the questions, determine the measures against which the proposals are judged in a rapidly changing marketplace. I haven't yet seen a way for a sponsorship submission site to evaluate the quality of the idea.

It usually starts when the sponsorship community reads that you have announced a deal. As a former boss of mine used to describe it, "Submerged whales don't get harpooned." But now you have breached the surface and the blood is in the water. The proposals come pouring in — unsolicited, many ill-conceived. If you are a big enough company, it never stops. In the interest of trying to create order from chaos, the company implements an online sponsorship "solution." Dealing with the sheer volume is a real issue. As my friend Harlan Stone (formerly of Velocity, now with Major League Gaming) once said to me, "The problem is that you can't tell what's real from what's junk."

My first experience with submitting online wasn't a positive one. For many years I have represented an airship company (also known as blimps). One of the strengths of airships is that you can customize the tours based on geography and seasonality to complement existing campaigns. The "fill in the blanks" format of the prospective sponsor's Web site was pretty straightforward at first. Name, contact information, description and so on. Then the challenges started. The system required that I provide market data on every market for the sponsorship. That would seem logical if I was a state fair, or a baseball team. However, if you don't know what markets would be of interest you are stuck. The sponsor listed more than 50 markets as possible selections. It wanted to know the demographics for each market. And, no, you couldn't plug in one and make it the same for the rest.

In general, I have found that online the questions don't allow you to capture the "spirit" of your sponsorship. It is very much like taking a survey. The data is only as good as the questions allow.

Since then, my agency has submitted a couple of dozen proposals via online sponsorship solutions. Most often the questions don't fit the answers.

How is age, income and sex more important than messaging, affinity, relevancy, brilliant activation or co-sponsor partnerships? What about the setting, the community, the talent and the track record of the property? How do you capture the imagination of a Web site?

We usually get an automated acknowledgment of our submission, and maybe one of 10 respond with a final decision. Could it be that sponsors don't have time to review their computerized sponsorship reports either? We have thrown in the towel. We don't submit anything online anymore.

So if the computer analyzes the opportunity, how does it rank the intangibles? Does the computer

actually select a property based on the age range in Des Moines? Someone has to set the filter as to what is in and what is out. Should a really good idea be discarded to an automated response because the market data misses the mark? Quantifying human consumer behavior has always been an elusive challenge. The target is constantly on the move. Measuring is as much of an art as it is a science. I don't yet see much "art" in online sponsorship solutions.

Here are a few suggestions for making the process work better:

Properties: Don't waste your time and the sponsor's time sending out the same proposal time after time. You will be confusing activity for progress. Read. There are lots of good publications where sponsors write or are interviewed. Most of the time, the information you want is out there. If you don't know how, hire someone to help.



GETTY IMAGES

A sponsor's Web site or sponsorship line can communicate what they want or don't want.

Sponsors: Use your Web site to provide information that is useful to properties before they submit. I called Target Corp.'s sponsorship line last year, and it very clearly said something like, "We are not accepting sponsorship proposals for racing." If you work for a large company, you should have a pretty well-defined sponsorship plan. You can probably share some of that on your Web site (the competition likely knows what you are doing anyway). There are a lot of "mom-and-pop" properties out there that just are not good at writing proposals. They are going to send them anyway, so tell them what you want to see or don't want to see. And for goodness sake, read some of them. Pass them around. There is no substitute for personal judgment.

Finally, keep in mind that if properties don't feel like they are getting a fair hearing online, they won't use it. But the proposals won't stop. They will just turn into more phone calls, e-mails, letters, faxes, and guys (like me) chasing you around at conferences.

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