



# *Don't Go to Another Sponsorship Conference Until You Read This!*

by Kim Skildum-Reid

As I was planning a major speaking and private training tour recently, I realised that I was going to have two free days in a major European city at the exact time that a major sponsorship conference was being held. It wasn't planned – just a coincidence.

I hadn't done a speech there in a long time, and I was there anyway, so I reached out and asked if they would be interested in my leading a session. I would even do it at no charge (rare), since I was there anyway. What can I say, I like what I do.

Here's where it got interesting. They told me that the only way to get on the program was to sponsor the event. In fact, all but a couple of past speakers specifically requested by their audience would be paying for the privilege of taking the stage.

Needless to say, I declined their offer. I did incredulously tell another colleague about it, and she said she was told by the organisers a couple of years ago that if she wanted to speak, she would have to be a sponsor, and was quoted the equivalent of around US \$10,000. Hmmmm.

This made me think... what kind of companies will pay to speak at a conference? What is the likelihood that they will impart valuable information? Or will they just get up there and try to sell you on whatever they do? Are any sponsors going to speak? Or will it just be one consultant after another trying to get more business?

(In the interest of full disclosure, I am a consultant. That said, it is highly unlikely anyone in Europe is going to hire someone from Australia to consult and I really don't want to spend that much time on planes, so that definitely was not my agenda!)

And what about the organiser? I'm all for a conference having sponsorship, but making it a prerequisite to speak is plain, flat greedy, and says that they don't care one bit about the quality of the content being provided. There may well be a few great speakers on the agenda, but that won't be any of the organiser's doing – just a happy coincidence.

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## Avoiding conference remorse

I have been to and spoken at a lot of disappointing conference, and they all seem to fall into a few general categories, but this was a new one for me.

It did get me thinking, though... how can unsuspecting delegates ensure that they are getting what they pay for? How can they be sure that the content is what they need and that the delegates are the people they want to meet? How can they avoid “conference remorse”?

Below, I've outlined some of the main categories, and included some related cut-and-paste questions that you can send to the conference organisers before you commit.

### Speakers pay

Not having been to the speaker-pay conference before, I could only imagine what it would be like: Speaker after speaker doing the old hard-sell, trying to recoup their investment, and not giving away any real expertise or insight, because why would anyone hire them then? Right??

If you are going to the conference to learn new skills and hear insightful case studies, I'm sorry to say, but one where the speakers have paid for the privilege is probably not the conference for you. On the other hand, if the conference organisers are able to get people to pay to speak, the likelihood is that it is a pretty large conference. Networking might be really good.

Your first step to sort this one out is to have a look at the speaker list and have a look at the sponsor list. If there is a lot of crossover, you know this conference is at least a good proportion of “speaker pay”.

If the sponsors aren't mentioned in the preliminary marketing material, you might want to ask these questions of the organisers:

- ▶ How many of your speakers are conference sponsors? Have any of your speakers paid a fee for the right to speak at the conference?

- ▶ If so, what steps have you taken to ensure that their content is topical, practical, and worthy of the \$XYZ delegate fee?

Or, if you're really ballsy, you could offer to speak on some hot topic and see how they come back. If they offer you a speaking slot for a fee, you know exactly what you're dealing with.

## The conference with an agenda

It's not secret – I've already blogged about it – that I was bitterly disappointed with my last couple of experiences with the IEG Conference in Chicago. There were a few reasons it didn't live up to expectations, but my main problem was that the speakers were largely IEG clients, and they were all taking the IEG line and promoting IEG products. The conference could not have been more homogeneous if every speaker was IEG staff.

IEG's approach to sponsorship and mine diverge considerably, but this definitely isn't a dig at the approach. My point is simply that a conference with dozens of speakers should also feature dozens of opinions, not just one. Unfortunately, many conference organisers treat their conferences as a chance to promote their agenda and/or services, enhance their relationships with clients, or both.

If the conference organiser is a consultant or otherwise services the corporate sponsorship industry, it might be worth asking:

- ▶ How many of the speakers showcased are clients of [the organiser]?
- ▶ How many of the speakers will be doing case studies of your clients' sponsorships?

If the proportion is high, you can be pretty sure that there won't be a lot of divergence of opinions or content. That doesn't mean it won't be worth attending for networking or that the content will be bad. If the networking looks fantastic, then go. If you really want to get a handle on the organiser's approach, though, it might be more effective for you to just book in for one of their workshops instead.

## Big names, big companies... no idea

This is a specialty of commercial conference companies. You know the ones – every week they run a conference on a totally different subject. My advice to you is that if you get a sponsorship conference brochure from a commercial conference company, chuck it in the recycling bin without delay.

Why? Because they don't know this industry at all. They don't know what constitutes best practice. They don't know who is actually doing sponsorship well. They don't know who will be able to provide insightful commentary and a practical approach. They don't know and they don't care. They just book whoever will attend from the biggest name companies and organisations they can find and think that will attract delegates.

Thankfully, most sponsorship pros who have been around a while know better than to attend, and my understanding is that numbers have really dropped off as better sponsorship conference options have cropped up.

I don't even have any questions on this. Just don't do it.

## Are you predator or prey?

This is a problem with sponsorship conferences aimed at both sides of the industry. I actually think it's preferable to have a mixed conference, but there are a few out there where the focus has shifted away from content, shot past networking, and moved into the realm of being predatory.

This can happen when sponsors are in a vast minority. They are usually seen with armloads of crappy, uncustomised proposals and promotional hoo-ha, shoved into their hands by the dozens of desperate sponsorship seekers who follow them around like an entourage. It makes being there unpleasant for the sponsors and their numbers dwindle year-on-year.

To keep up the appearance of being sponsor-friendly, organisers often invite primarily sponsors to speak, but in most cases, they don't stick around after their sessions. Or they feature sponsor-only sessions, after which you can see sponsor delegates pouring into elevators to their rooms rather than joining the rest of the throng for coffee

and muffins. I even know of a few sponsors who have registered for conferences under aliases – pretending they work for one of their agencies.

If you are a sponsor, you want to ensure that the sponsorship conference you go to will have you surrounded by a variety of peers, not predators. A few questions you may want to ask:

- ▶ Last year, what was the proportion of corporate sponsors who paid to register for your event? (In other words, they weren't speakers.)
- ▶ Have you had any issue with predatory behaviour among the sponsorship seekers in attendance? If so, have you initiated any "rules of engagement"?
- ▶ Do you have a sponsor-only stream? Sponsor-only networking sessions?
- ▶ Can you provide me with contact details for three corporate sponsors who paid to attend last year? (Yes, and you should actually drop them a line.)

Finally, if you are a sponsorship seeker and engage in predatory activity at sponsorship conferences, shame on you! Draw a distinction between making connections and making an arse of yourself and stay on the right side of that equation. If you don't, you're making life difficult for every sponsorship seeker out there trying to make a living.

## The resume builder

I know of one sponsorship association who feature the same speakers every year. And guess who those speakers are? The association's board. The same ten or twelve people take the stage year after year, showcasing themselves and building their CVs.

And here, I thought an industry association's primary job was to bring new ideas and skills to the members. How anyone believes this self-serving speaker stacking is ethical, I don't know.

I am not saying that this is common, but it is common enough, and I don't want you to be burned. If you are considering attending a conference run by a sponsorship industry association, you should take just a couple of minutes to do the following:

- ▶ Go to the association's website and find a list of all board members and state committee members (if applicable). While you're at it, find a list of the sponsors.
- ▶ Search on the association name plus the word "conference" and last year. Find the conference schedule, with a list of speakers, from last year.
- ▶ Compare those lists – board members, sponsors, and last year's speakers – with the current scheduled speakers. If there is a lot of crossover, you know the board is more concerned with their own careers than the development of your skills.

## Picking the best conference for you

There are two factors that are critical for a sponsorship conference to really deliver:

- ▶ The authenticity of their connection with the sponsorship industry
- ▶ Their mission

There are two types of organisations that tend to organise the most relevant, best quality sponsorship conferences.

- ▶ Industry associations
- ▶ Industry media

Both of these have both an authentic connection with the sponsorship industry and an understanding of hot topics, underlying issues, and best-practice case studies. It is also in both of their interests to raise the bar for the industry.

Industry media is content-driven, which should carry over into organising a conference, while the primary mission of industry associations is to better the industry. They aren't going to do that with a half-baked conference, so tend to put in the effort. That's not to say that some conferences organised by these types of organisations aren't patchy, but that if they are, it is less likely to be because there is some kind of counterproductive agenda at play.

This type of organiser could fall into the specific sponsorship industry, but could also include general marketing media and associations, as well as conferences for specific subsections (eg, the meetings industry, government marketing, or sports marketing).

Sponsorship associations should be a reliable source of good conferences with great content, and usually are. Unfortunately, there are a few exceptions. Do your homework on the board, and you'll know what the real agenda is. If you are a member and see this issue, you should not hesitate to speak up.

Do be a little careful about sponsorship conferences run by associations for specific marketing areas (not sponsorship), such as PR. They will probably do a fabulous job of covering off the development and management of sponsorship-driven PR, but that's just one part of a sponsorship leverage program. If you want an overall view, go to a conference run by an organisation that takes an overall view.

You also need to take into account your primary goal for being there. If your main objective is to network, your needs will be different than someone who is mainly there for the content. For some of you, it will be a balance.

## Networking

If your goal is networking, you will want a conference with at least some of the following features:

- ▶ Round-table discussions on certain topics (usually first thing in the morning)
- ▶ Long coffee breaks
- ▶ A lunchtime program that leaves plenty of time for chatting
- ▶ Evening social events – cocktails, dinner, sporting event, etc
- ▶ Provides delegates with contact details of other delegates after the event
- ▶ Provides delegates with at least names and companies for other delegates before the event, so you can reach out to people you really want to connect with and make a plan to chat at the event

## Learning

If your main goal is to learn something new, hone your skills, or get new ideas, you want a conference with at least some of the following features:

- ▶ International guest speakers (they tend to have fresh ideas and case studies)
- ▶ Panel discussions or debates
- ▶ Workshop-style sessions
- ▶ “Streamed” sessions for all or part of the conference
- ▶ One or more speakers who are known for being straightforward, shoot-from-the-hip types (they tend to give insider information and tips that others leave out)

Not only will these types of sessions tend toward having strong, practical content in and of themselves, just having these types of sessions say a lot about the focus the organiser puts on good content.

## Making the best of a bad situation

Okay... so you did all of the homework and it sounded good, but it isn't. Or your boss made you attend and now you're ready to commit hari-kari. You've got a couple of choices. You can ask hard questions or you can analyse. Better yet, do both.

### Analysis

You could use the time you are spending at a less-than-stellar conference to practice your critical analysis skills. As you listen to each presentation, ask yourself:

- ▶ How does XYZ sponsorship or leverage activity change the target markets' perceptions about that brand?

- ▶ How does XYZ sponsorship or leverage activity change the target markets' behaviours, with relation to that brand?
- ▶ Has the speaker even defined who the target markets are and what are their interests/needs?
- ▶ Have they measured the results? Are those results based on mechanisms (exposure, media coverage, etc) or measured against objectives?
- ▶ Does this sponsorship seem like a natural fit between the brand and the sponsee?
- ▶ Does this sponsorship seem objective-driven, consumer-driven, or ego-driven?
- ▶ How could they have elevated this sponsorship to win-win-win (so the sponsor wins, the sponsee wins, and the target markets win)? Do you have any good, creative, or even silly ideas, that could solve the problem?

I could go on and on, but keeping a list of questions something like this handy at a sponsorship conference will elevate even the worst session to an opportunity to exercise and hone your strategic approach.

### Asking the hard questions

This is simple. Take notes, as above, and then ask a tough question or two. The point is not to torture the speakers, but to give the speaker the opportunity to delve deeper, strategically. The other option is that they will totally flounder and you've showcased some major flaws in their approach that might keep others from following in their footsteps.

When all is said and done, I hope you don't end up stuck in a horrendous conference. I hope you learn everything you want to learn and meet all the right people and leave thinking it was the best use of time and money you've had in a long while. Good luck!

If you liked this article, please feel free to pass it along. You may also be interested in...

Additional resources

- ▶ [\*The Sponsorship Seeker's Toolkit 3rd Edition\*](#) – by Kim Skildum-Reid and Anne-Marie Grey, published by McGraw-Hill
- ▶ [\*The Ambush Marketing Toolkit\*](#) by Kim Skildum-Reid, published by McGraw-Hill
- ▶ [\*The Sponsor's Toolkit\*](#) by Anne-Marie Grey and Kim Skildum-Reid, published by McGraw-Hill
- ▶ [“Last Generation Sponsorship”](#) – A groundbreaking, free, PDF white paper by Kim Skildum-Reid on best practice sponsorship and what it can do for you.
- ▶ [Kim Skildum-Reid's Corporate Sponsorship Blog](#) – Packed with insight and how-to, this is a must read for sponsorship professionals.
- ▶ Kim Skildum-Reid also offers workshops, webinars, and in-house training and professional coaching for sponsors and sponsorship seekers, as well as options for government and industry associations. Contact Kim's team on [admin@powersponsorship.com](mailto:admin@powersponsorship.com) or more on customised in-house training and coaching, or register at [www.powersponsorship.com](http://www.powersponsorship.com) to find out about upcoming workshops in your area.

If you have any questions, a gripe, or would otherwise like to reach Kim Skildum-Reid, feel free to drop her a line on [kim@powersponsorship.com](mailto:kim@powersponsorship.com).