

Creative Sponsorship Meeting Tactics

I was reflecting on the first sponsors meeting we had for the LCC. What I recall about it was two colleagues sitting in a room creating what they called a three tier ,,how to Lose Your Marbles.. game. We were paralyzed on how to get community people out for a day. The first layer was the parish, the second layer was the region and the third layer was the globe. You dropped the marble in the top. If you were very lucky, it went all the way to the bottom and you impacted the globe and you lost all your marbles. That was our first attempt at creating a story that would allow us to get 200 people together.

I have experienced eight sponsorship meetings, three of which have resulted in Town Meetings. It is an interesting dynamic to watch the evolution of those sponsors committees in terms of our skill at dealing with them, and getting into the nitty gritty of doing a town meeting. I want to talk through with you the structure you have been using and give you some guide lines on what we think are the keys in Minneapolis to a fine sponsors committee meeting.

We have several presuppositions that have to do with our geography. One is that we may not get back to that town before the town meeting, therefore, we have a lot at stake in that first meeting and we do quite a bit of pre-prep through contexting the coordinator and getting a lot of people to that first meeting. The closest meeting we have had has been three and a half hours from Minneapolis; and the farthest has been 10 hours away. It is not helpful to assume that you are going to be able to get back there every other week in this kind of a quarter.

We have decided to do a very long long distance call with our coordinator two weeks before the sponsors committee meeting, which contexts the coordinator in contexting everybody who will attend that meeting before they get there. The coordinator gives the people the 12 task lists and assigns them to a task before they show up at the meeting. The coordinator is asking people, therefore, to be at the meeting for a specific reason, telling them a little bit about the town meeting, so that when you set up for a sponsorship meeting no one is there who does not know why they are there and has not made the decision to be a part of the sponsorship committee. That is very helpful, but it does not work across the board. There are usually several people who have walked in at the last minute and you have to give them enough context to get into the meeting.

Another one of our operating principles is that the engagement of people in the practice of thinking through the town meeting is going to be the motivity that keeps them going. They have to begin functioning immediately as task forces instead of as individuals as they are accustomed to doing. All of our sponsorship committees have consisted of strong people in their communities who are already able to do many things, but they have operated primarily as individuals. We get them operating as task force leaders right away, and if we don't get back there soon, the task forces will be the sustaining dynamic. So we invent the spirit through the happening of engagement and the motivity comes through emphasis on clear images of exactly what their tasks are in that first meeting. We have not done a lot of spirit methods, in the sense of conversations but we have given our coordinators spirit recommendations beginning with Tom Sawyer painting the fence, to allow people to look at tactical thinking in somewhat of a discontinuous perspective.

Let me lay out the meeting for you in terms of the five things we do in a sponsorship meeting. We spend about 30 minutes in the opening session allowing people to talk to each other, talking with them about the Town Meeting, and showing our Town Meeting slide show. We get images spinning in their minds of what actually happens that allows people to think practically about the task that they have on their hands. Usually we don't do any singing until we have had a conversation about who they are, what is special about their town, what kind of images they have about the town meeting, spinning about the Town Meeting, running through the day, and the slide show. After that, singing seems to make sense.

We experimented with starting out with spirit methods, but people are so unfamiliar with them that they became defensive. So we have tried to sneak up on them with that. That section tends to trigger a lot of questions about the town meeting which have not occurred to people before. They begin to get a sense of the uniqueness of their town and the uniqueness of the Town Meeting. Their questions are about how to connect two things -- the beginning of the building of the story of the town meeting, and what it is going to do for their community. You cannot go through this in an inflexible way. I do not think we have ever made it through this straight. People are so unpredictable in terms of where they get excited and where they take off. You may get to promotion way before it is on the timeline. I want to go through this rationally first; then I will talk about the rest.

In the second section, we immediately organize the task forces. We talk about what they are, context them, walk through the sheet and images of what they think the task is, and then work a bit on what the task is by reflecting back on their comments. We work very specifically with the clock or count-down image in front of the sponsorship manual. We put it on the board before the meeting starts so that it is just sitting behind us as we go through the meeting. We put the names of all the coordinators on the blackboard and fill in on the edges any task forces that are not covered. We get out names of people who should be there and would do that, and other people who ought to be in the task forces for support.

In about 30 minutes we build our task forces asking questions like, "Who do you know that needs to be here?" "What kind of a task would they pick up?" So they work out for themselves a list of people that they have decided are going to participate in the creation of the town meeting. People are generally very clear on their communities and who they can get for this kind of task. The steering committees for the three Town Meetings that have been held, have been between 15 and 25 people. One committee had more like 50 people, about one fourth of the Town Meeting, which was very helpful. A lot of great creativity went on around the edges in terms of decor.

The third section has people actually working in task forces. We get them into the sponsorship manual with task forces looking at the specific pages on their tasks. They walk through their sections to raise questions, look at the timeline, add things that they think necessary. They come together to report to each other on their images of the task; they art form where they got excited, what else needs to be added, and at that point we have discovered that a great deal of excitement breaks loose about all the possible ways that tasks could get done.

The fourth section has to do with getting everybody thinking about Town Meeting promotion. We look at the promotion workbook as a group, and discuss well-promoted events people have attended. We bring out the elements of these events, the keys, and how could we use those to reach a goal of 200-400 people. Then we distribute the promotion workbook. Our coordinator in the first sponsorship meeting read the context in the promotion manual. We have picked up and done that ever since, because it is very good. Then we work through as best we can in symbolic fashion, the steps laid out in the promotion manual.

We ask questions like what groups or individuals would you want to talk to about Town Meeting. We take three or four of those to the next page and go through the exercise to the person responsible category to be sure that group gets contacted, and demonstrate how that promotion is thought through very rationally. People become very excited at that point because the brainstorm gets very big in terms of groups and individuals that need to be contacted. They really interiorize the concrete possibility of getting 200-400 people out, and decide to do it at that point. Most of the towns we have dealt with are very small from 5,000 to 15,000. They have never imagined calling a meeting for 200 people and they don't have very concrete images of that.

The most critical element of the meeting is the reflection that goes on after that as a group. A section in the back of the promotion manual has references from different places. We have read this out loud and then raise the question "What would you like to have people say about your Town Meeting?" This gets images spinning on what their Town Meeting will be like.

That is a rough sketch of what the meeting looks like. It is very bare bones and very practical, but it creates a very spirited group of people and so far, we have not been back between this meeting and a week before the Town Meeting. We have used the phone to continue the spiritizing dynamic with the coordinator, and go over a check list. So far it has done the job. I have a check list of things that I think are crucial out of that experience. In talking with some of my colleagues who have been doing these, I have compiled a list of the keys to effective sponsorship meetings.

- 1) 15 to 25 people minimum, meeting with the coordinator before the meeting, to context the task and objectives of the meeting, the timeline and the roles that need to be played. The coordinator must contact people on the steering committee, and get them in tasks before the meeting. The coordinator runs the show, introduces us, runs the meeting, and usually walks the group through the clock, task force section. Another critical element, we have discovered, is to have blackboards and butcher paper to allow that clock to be in front of people and too, allow people to brainstorm out names. In many cases where the excitement has been built, without the butcher paper and blackboard you have no way of holding that kind of brainstorm.

Another key in an effective sponsorship meeting is walking through both the sponsorship manuals and the promotion manual, so they get the whole sweep of what it is going to take to pull that Town Meeting together. It is crucial to meet as task forces and hold a reporting-back session. The key to the internal is that your style needs to be utterly flexible. You cannot make one single presupposition and you cannot assume that they know anything. A Town Meeting at East Grand Forks was run by the mayor, a 60-year old woman, who walks with a cane. She is really a dear to that town, and she decided that the Town Meeting was something they ought to do. We need a broad representation from the community at the steering

committee meeting. She got 50 people out, but there were about four men there. It was sponsored by the Federated Women's Club of East Grand Forks, which is about 14 groups. The conversation went something like this, "Why aren't there anymore men here?" Their response was, "They have screwed up our community so bad why would we want them at our Town Meeting?" Another woman said, "What can they do anyway?" At this point the Kiwanis president stood up and said, "We can carry tables and chairs!" When you tell someone you want a diverse group, for the sponsorship committee you really spell out what you mean by that in terms of ages, sex, and parts of the community. It begins there and you do not assume that they know anything about anything, because they operate out of very strange images sometimes. They did get a few men working on it, by the way, and they were delighted to discover that they were not all bad guys. Their city council is three women and one man and the mayor is a woman.

Flexibility is really critical in terms of the style and our not assuming anything. We have had some incredible experiences with just dumb little things like having the location of the Eau Clair Town Meeting in the coliseum which holds about 4,000 people. Someone mentioned that they might fill that building with 4,000 people by sending out a letter to the newspapers from the sponsors committee. You have to, at every point, check this out to see if your presuppositions are speaking to the situation. That is a critical part of the prep work.

Get out the timeline before the group as soon as you stand up in a sponsorship meeting. You forget, in the need to get through a lot of material, the presuppositions that people are actually operating out of. Lay out the tasks very specifically on a timeline on the blackboard. Review things like space issues that usually do not come up unless you bring them up. People's images on how to use space are very different from ours. In several cases where the locations were secured before the sponsorship meeting we have met in the space where the Town Meeting will be. Looking at how we would arrange it has been one way of dealing with space issues. One key to the closing part of the meeting is to review again for the people what the "sign" on Saturday for the Town Meeting needs to look like. In the several Town Meetings I have orchestrated, you do not assume anyone is going to show up on Saturday, or know that they ought to. You give them a context about the fact that they are all going to have to be there Friday night to meet with the orchestrator in their task forces and put up decor. You need to clarify for them images of what workshop leaders are. We have to work with both local people and our own people. We decided to turn the workshops over whether or not it would ruin the Town Meeting. Our experience has been that they are really more of a core group than the steering committees. In terms of their excitement about the Town Meeting; actually the steering committees are so busy during the day of the Town Meeting that they do not get engaged in the Town Meeting itself. Their own experience is somewhat periphery, getting the food, seeing that the pencils are sharpened, and registering people; and they are worrying about what is coming next. For the most part, our workshop leaders are trained and have experienced the methods and they get very excited; so we clarify the issue of the workshop leaders by talking about the possibility of community people while we are there (10-12 community people as workshop leaders).

Another key is leaving a clear image of meeting as task forces. The one place we didn't do that, people worked as individuals and the turn out was not as good as it could have been. So out of that we talked about the image of meeting weekly

as task forces, and suggested in the meeting with the coordinator that the very last thing they do is consent on meeting weekly as task forces.

The other key is leaving a format with the coordinator which suggests to him that they meet weekly, have a conversation, break into task forces, and work for an hour and then report. We have experienced that most coordinators have let the group come and report what they have done already and when they get done they do not have any time to work as task forces. We had to lay out a very specific timeline for them so that they could deal with the next steps at some point, rather than just discuss what had been accomplished or had not been accomplished. I think that probably covers the kind of specifics of the sponsorship meeting as we experienced it.

Our reflection in each case of having done a sponsorship committee meeting is that there are no two alike. Each set of individuals is utterly unique and unpredictable. Weekly calls, if not present at their sponsorship committee meetings, is critical.

We are doing an interesting experiment with the reservation Town Meeting and the New Oxford, N. Dakota Town Meeting. They are 10 hours from us and at the Fort Yates Town Meeting they do not have a telephone number. You must call the sheriff to have him relay messages. The sheriff also hand delivers mail there, too. There is one little story from Whittier which has held for me the importance of the preparation of the steering committee meeting and the gift and possibilities of the Town Meeting. About three weeks ago, we opened in Whittier a brand-new building where we were going to have the LCC. They have been working for 62 years for this building in the community and they finally won! In that building in the cornerstone is a time capsule, the one and only park building in the city of Minneapolis with a time capsule and they say it will be the last because it was such a pain in the neck. In that capsule went the Town Meeting documents, and the LCC documents that have occurred. That is to be opened in 100 years. I think that is very exciting. Wouldn't it be something to do that in every major city in some way -- all the newspaper articles on the Town Meeting, the document, the reports, and the five-year plan that was built by the Guild on the other side of it -- are all in that capsule for someone to look at in 100 years. That is going to be a shocking kind of event. Our sponsors committees so far are doing well, and we are looking forward to 11 Town Meetings in February. We are doing a series of sponsors meetings this week. I am hoping to get hold of Bailey's spirit stuff so we can provide our coordinators with what effect that kind of spiritizing is going to do to our sponsors committees. So far, they have generated their own, but we will see about the future.

-----Sue Laxdal