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onsider these statistics from a 2007 survey conducted by Turnkey Intelligence: Seventy-seven percent of people would be more likely to purchase from and support a

company if it sponsored the local high school. And 75 percent of respondents believed that high school sports have a greater community influence than professional, college, or other amateur sports.

In other words, those of us in high school athletics are sitting on a gold mine. Our students, parents, teachers, and fans are a target market that businesses are eager to reach.

When school district funding covers the costs of athletics programs, there may be no need to bring in additional money for our teams. But as budgets are slashed and parents balk at increased participation fees, it

Selling the Passion

There's nothing like the excitement surrounding a high school sporting event. Upgrading your fundraising efforts starts with conveying that passion—and explaining the market it can bring—to local businesses.

By Scott Garvis

becomes important to recognize the significant marketing power that is at our disposal.

By offering advertising and sponsorships to local businesses, we can harness that power and ease the financial pressures we face. All schools have many ways they can promote local companies, from signs and banners on athletic fields to PA announcements to space on a Web site to special promotions. In most communities, business owners covet the opportunity to get their message out to buyers through these means, and they are willing to pay to do so, provided they are approached in the right way.

Offering store managers game tickets and invitations to special events when you first meet with them is a nice touch ... Businesses get tired of donating to causes without getting much back.

As Athletic Director at Burnsville (Minn.) High School for four years, I implemented fundraising programs and sponsorships in many areas, and I am starting to do the same in my new job at Eastside Catholic High School in Sammamish, Wash., a suburb of Seattle. At Burnsville, this work allowed us to add programming without significantly raising participation fees or gate admissions.

START WITH A STRATEGIC PLAN

To accomplish this type of fundraising, you need a lot of help from others. That's why, to start, you have to convince administrators, parents, coaches, and the local community to get on board with your ideas. The best way I found to do this was by constructing a well thought out strategic plan.

Start by determining the athletic department's needs, especially those not being met through the school district athletic budget. A strategic plan presents goals for tangible improvements and why you need them. Without stated objectives, it can be hard to get buy-in.

For example, many years ago, I started a lift-a-thon for our football program with no defined goals, and the event had limited success. The next year, we put together printed materials that listed and pictured the items we hoped to purchase with proceeds from the lift-a-thon, and we quadrupled the pre-

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vious year's totals. When community members had a clear vision for what we were trying to accomplish, they felt like they were a part of the process and were eager to help.

When launching a larger campaign, the plan is more involved, but just as important. The broad strategic plan should include a mission statement for your athletics program and a vision for how that mission will be met. For example, at Burnsville, our focus was always on serving student-athletes by providing resources that will develop and enhance their athletic experience. Regardless of the mission, the plan should also include

goals that are visible and attainable.

It is important to involve all your stakeholders in creating this document. We included coaches, our student-athlete advisory council, parents, administration, and our board of trustees. These groups help ensure that your philosophy coincides with your school district's mission and vision and is meaningful to everyone involved.

The second part of creating a strategic plan focuses on determining what you have to offer local businesses. Before you solicit them, think about all the products, goods, and services your students, parents, and fans

Getting your sponsors to your events allows them to see how their money is working and feel like they are part of the excitement of high school athletics. We found this led to further marketing opportunities.

use. Then, think about the local companies that sell those products. Identify businesses whose target audience includes the people who attend your games.

Consider brand loyalty when developing your plans. Today's more savvy businesses are focused on cultivating loyalty to their products, which is a huge buying factor among families and teens. The Turnkey Intelligence survey found that 89 percent of youths are likely to switch from one brand to another if the second brand is associated with a good cause, such as a high school—this is a key statistic to use in selling advertising.

While it takes work to put together a written plan, we found it provided focus and

meaning for the athletic department, our constituents, and those we solicited. When business owners see you have a vision and concrete needs for your department, they feel their money is being used wisely. Our plan also helped get buy-in from student-athletes, parents, and alumni, which led to the establishment of our alumni foundation, increased volunteerism, and an all-sport booster organization. This eventually led to additional facility upgrades, programming, and revenues, which were pivotal to our success.

APPROACH & FOLLOW THROUGH

Before approaching any local businesses, know that the one key to success is developing relationships. Sending a letter or brochure to local businesses and waiting for them to respond won't get you far. Business owners receive mail and are asked for money from churches, youth organizations, and numerous non-profits constantly.

To stand out from others, you need to follow your letter with a phone call or face-to-face meeting. I never go into these discussions with a sales pitch or even any preconceived dollar amounts. Rather, I approach the meeting as an opportunity to develop trust, respect, and a rapport for future opportunities. I talk about our athletic program, letting the business owner see and feel my enthusiasm for creating a great experience for student-athletes in their community, and I talk in general about how partnering with the school can

increase their recognition and sales—with us, they have the potential to reach a very engaged target audience. I also ask them to tell me about their needs and marketing strategies.

Another initial strategy is to provide the business with a tangible connection to the athletic department. Offering store managers game tickets and invitations to special events when you first meet with them is a nice touch. In Burnsville, I would also bring in memorabilia to hang in their establishment as well as T-shirts and hats for them to use as promotional items or employee give-aways. Businesses get tired of donating to causes without getting much back and

this gesture shows you are thinking about what might appeal to them.

From there, work with the business to develop opportunities that benefit both of you. At Burnsville, we offered four levels of standard sponsorships. At our lowest level, \$400, a business would receive a small Web site ad with a link and two complimentary 10-punch season passes. Our highest level, \$1,500, offered a full-page ad in our fall, winter, and spring sports programs, game announcements, a large banner Web site ad with a link, game sponsorship opportunities, and season passes. A few of our other options were a score table or banner ad (\$800), sponsoring a team poster (\$500), and handing out promotional merchandise at games (\$400 to \$600).

We also tried to work with each business to figure out their needs. For example, Velocity Sports Performance had just opened a gym in our town and they wanted to educate teens and their parents about their training systems. So our partnership with them entailed an ad on our scrolling scoreboard and the opportunity to set up a table at halftime of games with information about their business and coupons for free two-week sessions.

Another sponsor did not want to pay for any traditional advertising options, but was interested in getting information about its product into the hands of those people attending our games. For this company, we handed out flyers that promoted its air purifier, and the athletic department received 20 percent of each unit it sold.

In some cases, the relationship took some time to develop, but we did not rush it. For example, when I first approached a Burger King restaurant down the street from our school, they were not interested in spending any dollars with us. But I did get the store to agree to do a cross-promotional sponsorship, in which their employees wore T-shirts promoting one of our games and we handed out coupons for their food. From there, we asked if we could use their parking lot for a car wash fundraiser, which brought a ton of business to them. A few other cross-promotional ideas went well, and soon they were happy to sign on for sponsorships.

Make sure you always take the time to write thank you letters and invite your sponsors to events. Also consider hosting a sponsor recognition night, where you present each with some memorabilia or a plaque at halftime. Getting your sponsors to your events allows them to see how their money is working and feel like they are part of the excitement of high school athletics. We found this led to further marketing opportunities.

How can you develop these relationships if you are new to the community or have never worked with businesses before? One idea is to work with your chamber of commerce or a similar group. Also, keep in mind that everyone you meet in the business sector of your community can be a future partner, and current relationships can develop new strategic alliances.

For example, say you meet a parent who owns a printing company in town. You've found the perfect opportunity to trade free advertising in your game programs for the cost of the printing. And you've potentially found a new sponsor.

It can also be helpful to create a brochure that serves as a representation of your program. The one I developed at Burnsville listed all our different sponsorship opportunities and included photos of our student-athletes in action, fans in the stands, and some of our promotional items. I also used quotes from business owners already on board to show that advertising with us really worked to promote their companies.

And don't forget to include Web site advertising in your options. In this area, the more visits your site attracts, the more money you can bring in. Take the initiative to work with the IT coordinator at your school to find your current athletic Web page stats. Hard numbers can really open your sponsors' eyes to the opportunity of advertising with your athletic department online.

Adding content to bring in parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, friends, and fans is the next step. Post as much information on your site as you can, and use all of the marketing available to attract visitors there. We have used our Web site to vote for an athlete of the month, which drove enormous traffic to our site. This will be the future of athletic fundraising.

One last point about approaching sponsors is that you must do your homework and know what your community businesses are looking for. I have had the opportunity to serve as an athletic administrator in very small districts with less than 100 kids per graduating class, medium size districts, and very large districts with 800 kids per graduating class. I have found that while small communities have a limited number of businesses, they have such an investment in their schools that they are very supportive of sponsorship initiatives.

In large metropolitan areas, the sale of sponsorship packages has to appeal to the bottom line. Although there are more corporate dollars to go around, the sponsorship sale is tougher, requiring more detail on

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who the company's message will reach and how often. (For more on how to partner with bigger businesses, see "Linking with Chains," below.)

PARTNERS IN PROMOTIONS

Along with offering traditional advertis-

ing options at Burnsville, we partnered with businesses on various game-day marketing ideas. The goal here was to create some unique programs that would both benefit specific businesses and draw more people to games.

For example, we worked with a local car

dealership and raffled off a two-year car lease at a football game, which raised \$15,000 for new uniforms. During basketball season, the cheerleaders threw merchandise with a sponsor's advertisement on it into the crowd after all three-point goals, which allows double exposure for the business since people

Partnering with regional and national chain stores is often more time-consuming than working with smaller businesses. To start, just getting to the right contact is difficult—it's pretty common to be told, "Our regional office handles all of the sponsorships." But I've found that with enough phone calls, I can uncover the right person to speak with, and that the partnerships can pay big dividends in the end.

For example, I had the opportunity to develop a shopping event with Dick's Sporting Goods, in which our

athletic department received a percentage of the store's sales over a three-day period. We promoted the store by asking all our spring athletes to purchase their sporting gear there and handing out discount coupons. Dick's decorated the entrance to the store with our school colors and welcomed our shoppers.

The idea was a great success. Our student-athletes and families saved money, our athletic department received a nice sum from the large amount of purchases, and Dick's increased its sales. It was a win-win-win!

LINKING WITH CHAINS

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would later wear the items around town. Here are some other game-day promotional partnerships that worked well:

On the Radio: By partnering with a local radio station and the restaurant Buffalo Wild Wings, we turned a late season football game into a very fun event. The radio station promoted the game, provided give-aways, and had a celebrity DJ on hand, along with broadcasting the game, which is rare in the Minneapolis area. There was also a raffle specifically for our students, which was drawn at halftime. The winner received a one-year supply of wings from Buffalo Wild Wings and also got to try to throw a Nerf football through a car window for a chance at a \$25,000 college scholarship.

The radio station took care of all the logistics of the event, which included securing an insurance provider to cover the scholarship cost in case the student made the throw. While the radio station did not give us any dollars, the event helped increase our attendance, and thus our gate, in a huge way—we tripled our revenue from the previous year.

Scoring for Cash: A game-day promotion we implemented in football, basketball, and

soccer asked a sponsor to donate a certain amount of money based on the team's success. In return, the business (usually a local or regional bank) received a full-page ad in our program and a banner in the stadium or gym. After each payout, an announcement was made thanking the sponsor and a ban-

Conference championship: \$500

Section championship: \$750

State championship: \$1,000

Let 'Em Eat Cake: One of our more unconventional events was a cake auction, run by our booster club, which raised \$25,000. We sent letters to our sponsors,

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ner ad tallied the total donation. Here's how it worked for football:

Each interception: \$25

Each defensive fumble recovery: \$25

Each field goal: \$25

Each touchdown: \$100

Each game won: \$100

Winning record for season: \$250

asking them to donate a special cake and some type of product. Attendees at one of our basketball games then bid on each sponsor's display.

The businesses worked hard to outdo each other with their cakes and prizes to get the largest bid. For example, our local Pepsi distributor created a cake that looked

Circle No. 150

Circle No. 151

like a juke box and put a real iPod inside. A jewelry store included a nice piece of jewelry with their cake, and others added gift cards. Some cake-prize displays went for as much as \$3,000. We also invited all

brochures, our outgoing boosters to talk to businesses, and the most organized individuals to be in charge of special events.

We also asked our Alumni Foundation, Chamber of Commerce, Lions Club, and

used interns from local colleges to design our printed materials.

You might also think about turning to rival schools for help. In the future, I see conferences or other school groupings joining together to maximize profitability, much like colleges have done over the past decade. The key is getting a group of high schools together and making connections with national and regional brands. A dozen Friday night high school football games can deliver the same exposure as a professional football game. Do the math and you will see that this can mean big money for interscholastic athletics.

Done right, raising money will require both time and effort, two commodities athletic directors rarely have enough of. So it is imperative that fundraising becomes a team effort. When our work at Burnsville started paying off, the students, parents, and community members were proud of our accomplishments. Every time we completed a project, we felt great about making experiences better for both current and future student-athletes. And that is truly what interscholastic athletics is all about. ■

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the sponsors to come to the game, so local business owners could network with one another.

GROUP EFFORT

As mentioned at the start of this article, an athletic director cannot do this alone. At Burnsville, boosters and parent support groups were integral in our fundraising endeavors. One key was asking for assistance in a person's area of expertise. We asked our creative parents to design

various community business organizations for assistance. Surrounding yourself with people who understand the vision of your department and care about the tradition and development of athletics within your community is vitally important.

Students who want to gain real-world experience can be a great resource, too. Consider asking members of your student-athlete advisory council to help in marketing and fundraising, and don't be afraid to look beyond your own campus—I have

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