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Sailing ahead: The power of sponsorship

Substantial amounts of time and money are invested in building a brand for a company's products or services, but this doesn't necessarily guarantee that you will stand out from the crowd. One element of the marketing mix that is often overlooked and sometimes wrongly perceived as too expensive or difficult to quantify is sponsorship. But if well-chosen and carefully orchestrated, it can deliver high returns.

As a vendor of accounting software, we operate, like many companies, in a highly competitive environment, often against larger players than ourselves. Two years ago we decided that to enter new markets we needed to invest heavily in R&D and re-brand with a new product.

When you sell something quite prosaic like software it can be difficult to create a buzz and this is where sponsorship can help, because it can attract attention, yet still endorse your key brand values. Selecting a sponsorship partner that matches your own values is crucial, but it must also appeal to your target audience. Be aware too of the positive effects any possible sponsorship deal can have on our own staff too, so involve them in the decision-making process.

We finally chose sailing because it engendered the same spirit we were promoting as a company and also because it had a wide and growing fanbase amongst senior managers from the finance and IT professions. Our choice of supporting IMOCO ranked professional sailor Steve White in his quest to compete in the famous Vendee Globe race in 2008 gave us something refreshing and leisure-based that offered customers and staff a break from the commercial world. This kind of sponsorship also gives you the chance to offer greater customer value through hospitality events and acts as an exciting vehicle for on-going communication with both existing and new customers.

Of course, from a PR perspective, sponsorship can help deliver hundreds of column inches (our new brand has appeared in all the major trade press such as Computer Weekly) but the goodwill it creates with customers, prospects and staff is even higher. Even if you have adopted a brand strategy, getting your staff to continually think, live and breathe the company values can be hard. Using sponsorship can help address this, as it is a constant reminder and embodiment of what the company and its products stand for. One example of a subtle way of doing this is running a flat-screen monitor in reception and also on your website, with fresh news feeds and rolling presentations that cover sponsorship updates, excerpts from the press and general company news. A regular blog works well too attracting new and existing customers.

If you are a business that needs to differentiate, retain or attract new customers and keep your staff motivated, then sponsorship could be just what you are looking for. What's more, it's great fun!

Simon Kearsley is managing director at Symmetry, vendor of accounting software [bluQube](#).

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