



Innovative Sponsorships

From Transaction to Transformation

By **Candice Wartier**

For many associations, securing sponsorships allows them to provide innovative programming and initiatives to their members. Without sponsorships, associations may not have the resources to host events and provide members with the educational programs they require to keep members engaged. To make matters even more complex, many associations face declining memberships due to millennial members who are more likely to seek networking and educational opportunities elsewhere. Combined, these issues are causing associations to get smarter about sponsorship opportunities and the value they provide to membership.

A trend many associations are experiencing is the move away from transactional branding sponsorships, such as one-off events, to partnering on longer-term programs.

Innovation at Work

Most associations have annual meetings that provide opportunities for corporations to sponsor exhibit space and sessions. Corporations gain access to members and brand recognition in visible ways. However, corporations and their association partners are finding that the sponsorship of meetings—whether it be a logo on the badge lanyard or the opening of a general session—can be very transactional and result in a low ROI.

“One thing I leveraged at the American Academy of Periodontology was the idea of year-round, multi-year, multi-faceted partnerships. Annual meetings can be very transactional,” says Bryn Reese, director, professional relations at the American Academy of Periodontology (AAP). “Annual meetings can be quite transactional. While these are important and cover the costs of a meeting, many associations have become very annual-meeting focused when there are many other priorities that associations and sponsors could share.”

“As with any company involved in sponsoring programs, activities and events with partner organizations such as ADA or AAP, there needs to be a strategic fit relative to what our goals are. It’s becoming rare to sponsor a gala or dinner—really the only return on investment is branding associated with that,” said Fotinos S. Panagakos, DMD, PhD, global director, scientific affairs at Colgate-Palmolive Co. “We need to build brand image beyond sponsoring a party—it doesn’t translate to our business ROI.”

According to Panagakos, Colgate, a consumer products company, looks at ways to align with its professional audiences—dental professionals, hygienists, etc.—and it is through them that they reach the consumer. “We don’t actually have to talk about products, but we are viewed as providing resources for professionals. We’ve done this consistently, and it’s been a successful approach.”

As AAP saw its science agenda evolving, it looked at what opportunities it could offer corporate partners that would help AAP members build relationships that create healthier communities and provide a referral network that improves everyone’s business.

To meet both their needs, AAP and Colgate collaborated on the AAP: Colgate Article Series (see sidebar on page 26) and the AAP/Colgate 2016 Study Club Program, which was piloted and is now being rolled out to AAP members. The study program for AAP members was created for use in delivering periodontal health information to referring general dentists and dental hygienists. It is an AAP initiative funded through an educational grant from Colgate and promoted as a member benefit.

The study club program features content relevant to the general dentist and hygienist audiences, provides one to two CE hours and is marketed to AAP members who will participate by hosting a study club in their local community.

The initiative positions periodontists as dentistry’s experts in the diagnosis, treatment and prevention of periodontal disease and simultaneously delivers valuable educational opportunities to dental professionals, demonstrating Colgate’s commitment to scientific credibility and continuing education.

AAP:Colgate Article Series

The American Academy of Periodontology (AAP) and Colgate have collaborated with Dimensions of Dental Hygiene to publish a quarterly article series since 2011. Each article focuses on a periodontal topic that is relevant to the dental hygiene audience, is peer-reviewed and carries up to two continuing education credits. The AAP and Colgate are responsible for co-ideating the article topics and proposing suggested authors. Articles appear in four issues of *Dimensions of Dental Hygiene*, to be distributed to its full circulation of more than 70,000 dental hygienists and two issues of *Decisions in Dentistry*, to be distributed to the full circulation of dentists. Each article aims to raise awareness of periodontal disease and reinforce the important role of the dental hygienist in comprehensive patient care.

“People view Colgate providing support for education and clinical guideline development, and these types of activities have proven to build our brand with the dental profession,” says Panagakos.

Rethinking the Approach

AARP-IL’s approach to sponsorship has also evolved during the past few years. AARP used to purchase a sponsorship package and receive its logo on the program and possibly be verbally recognized at the event, depending on the contribution level.

“At AARP-IL, we realized years ago that this approach to sponsorships worked great for the organization hosting the event, but it didn’t help us reach our goals to make the sponsorship relevant to our 1.7 million members in Illinois and to the community at large,” says Gerardo Cardenas, director of communications, AARP-IL.

AARP-IL changed its approach from sponsorship to partnership, which allowed AARP-IL to seek out opportunities that would be of value to its members. The organization is currently working with Crain’s Chicago Business, a media partner, to launch AARP 50 over 50, a program designed to highlight people who are “re-careering.”

Another approach to partnership involves getting creative. It doesn’t require a monetary investment, but it does benefit both organizations. For AARP-IL, this included partnering with NorthShore University HealthSystem’s Center for Brain Health on a brain health event.

“We receive numerous pitches to sponsor/partner on events each day—AARP-IL works better with groups with whom we already have a relationship,”

KEY INGREDIENTS FOR A SUCCESSFUL SPONSORSHIP

Mutually Beneficial Relationship

The relationship between the association and corporate sponsor must be mutually beneficial. For professional specialty societies, a major reason why they seek corporate partnerships is because they are important to advancing the field. Sponsors need to see a return on their investment.

“While measuring ROI is always a challenge, we need to consider initiatives that add value to the broader profession,” says Panagakos.

“Associations and members can’t move forward in any field without industry and academia,” Reese adds. “So much innovation happens within industry. Corporations are our partners in ensuring the success of any specialty, whether it is the dairy association or periodontology. Many corporations are conducting research and development that are aligned with the association’s mission.”

Create a Partnership with the Sponsor

Associations and their sponsors understand that the relationship must be more than just the sponsorship. For AAP, the needs of both organizations must be a priority.

“Some associations put their association needs first. I come to the table putting both of our needs first. We lead together,” says Reese.


“Organizations know where we stand because they stay in contact with us,” adds Panagakos. “The request is not the only time we hear from them. They set up regular monthly or bi-monthly calls with their staff and volunteer leadership with

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key people from Colgate to discuss what we are working on. This really helps facilitate an effective relationship where we understand why it would be a good fit for both organizations.”

Think Long Term

Successful partnerships are long term. They move beyond a transaction and develop opportunities that benefit both organizations. They stay ahead of the curve and focus on what’s next. Many sponsoring organizations of professional societies consider how they will reach the younger professionals entering the field—millennials. According to Panagakos, the trend is that people are getting meeting burnout. Millennials don’t see the same value in going to meetings as might a baby boomer dentist for whom meetings were once the only way to receive education.

“This is why we invested in online education – and have taken it global – to meet the need and to bring education to where the professional wants to take advantage of it,” says Panagakos. 

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