GETTING STARTED

YOUR FIRST SPONSOR, STEP BY STEP

A rock bouncer racer who made 76 calls for his first yes, King of the Hammers' founder and Boxo USA's partnership manager lay out how a first deal actually comes together.

By Alex Striler · 5 min read · Read online at sponsorshiptactics.com/library/your-first-sponsor-step-by-step

Nobody's first sponsor is a national brand that calls out of the blue. It's usually someone who already knows you, a company whose parts are already on your car, or a deal so small it barely registers as a deal. The racers who get funded later are the ones who treat that first small yes as the start of a process, not as a consolation prize. Here's what that process looks like, from people who have lived it on both sides of the table.

MAKE THE LIST, THEN MAKE EVERY CALL

Matt Holt races a rock bouncer, calls races as a broadcaster and owns an off-road shop. He grew up the son of a car dealer, knew plenty of business owners with big revenues, and figured his first season of sponsorship would be easy. He wrote down everyone he knew who would probably give him money, then everyone who might, then the people he doubted would say yes but planned to call anyway.

It was not easy. "I thought this is going to be the easiest thing ever, and I thought I'll do five sponsors, a thousand dollars each," he told me on Meet the Sponsors. "I called 76 people before I got my first yes." He worked through his entire "yes" list and most of his "maybe" list first. "I went through all of my yeses and like three-fourths of my maybes before I got a yes." The yes came from a good friend who owned an excavating business, and Holt calls that deal the spark that led to seven years of racing nationwide.

▶ WATCH MATT HOLT TELL THE STORY

There are two lessons there. First, the list matters. Your first money is far more likely to come from people who already know and trust you than from strangers. Second, the number of calls matters. Seventy-six calls for one yes is normal. Plan for it.

START WITH THE COMPANIES ALREADY ON YOUR CAR

The second place to look is the parts you already buy. Dave Cole, founder of King of the Hammers, told a room of racers at the PRI Show that his own sponsorships started that way, before King of the Hammers existed. "Buy your parts, make it clear you came to buy parts, not to take parts. Build that relationship," he said. His reasoning is about credibility: "If you're not willing to give your money to that person or that company to run that product, you shouldn't be telling other people to do the same thing."

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Some brands have built a formal on-ramp for exactly this. Robert Wilson, strategic partnership manager at Boxo USA, sends new racers to the company's affiliate program rather than reading cold pitches. "This is the entry into sponsorship, right? We're going to give you a small discount to be able to purchase product," he said. Boxo watches the affiliate report every month, and the numbers do the talking: "If that one person sold $40,000 worth of product, guarantee you that person's getting a phone call next month." He was just as blunt about the wrong way in: "You will never get a sponsorship from us from a DM."

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A discount code doesn't feel like sponsorship. But it's a measurable record of what you can sell, and that record is what turns a racer into a phone call.

TAKE THE SMALLEST DEAL ON THE TABLE

When a racer at one of my PRI seminars asked whether big-company sponsorship advice applied to a small Midwest team, my answer was that the scale changes but the method doesn't: "When you're a smaller race team, the trick is to start small and grow. All my big sponsorships started small." One long relationship from my Lucas Oil days is my favorite example. "It was a product deal to start with. After 20 years, he was getting 900 grand a year from Lucas." ▶ WATCH THE FULL ANSWER

That means starting regionally. Go to the local Ford dealer before Ford corporate. Pull up a map, draw a circle about an hour and a half around the track, and find the biggest businesses inside it, because that's how far most of the spectators drive. Offer those businesses what a small company can actually use: tickets, hospitality, a chance to bring their customers to the races. Local franchises like Chick-fil-A rarely hand out cash, but coupons for free meals pull people into your pit, and a busy pit makes better photos for the next sponsor you approach.

The same thinking applies when a bigger brand offers tiers. Another racer at that seminar asked how to negotiate with a large automotive company that only offered three fixed levels. "Take the smallest one. Get your foot in the door. Once your foot is in the door, if you're good at what you do, you're going to stay a long time and it's going to grow." If you grab the top tier and can't deliver, there is no renewal, and renewals are where the money is.

EXPECT IT TO TAKE LONGER THAN YOU THINK

Holt has watched enough programs grow to know that the timeline is the hardest part. He told the story of a monster truck team that Ram picked as its sponsor after a long selection process. When the team asked how they had been chosen, Ram's people said they'd been watching for five years: the haulers, the trucks, the way the crew treated fans at pit parties. "We've been watching your race program for five years," was how Holt recounted it. That team now runs several trucks on the back of that first deal.

He also learned that decisions about you happen in rooms you never see. He was once picked as an announcer after a conference call where the production staff discussed and voted on every candidate. Nobody told him until much later. "Your name might be getting thrown around in meetings that you don't even have a clue about," he said.

His advice to grassroots racers who are scraping together $50 from three people is the same thing he tells himself: "Please, please, please hear me: do not get discouraged, because your day will come. You will get that big break. It may take a year or five years or ten years of racing." ▶ WATCH MATT HOLT'S ADVICE

THE TAKEAWAY

- **Write three lists**: people who will probably back you, people who might, and long shots. Call every name. Expect dozens of calls per yes.
- **Be a paying customer first.** Ask for help from the companies whose parts you already buy, and join any affiliate or discount program they offer. Then track what you sell.
- **Start inside a 90-minute radius of the track** and offer local businesses tickets, hospitality and traffic, not logo space.
- **Take the smallest tier or the product deal**, over-deliver, and let year two grow out of year one.
- **Act like you're being watched**, because you are. First sponsors often decide long before they call.

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VOICES IN THIS ARTICLE: Matt Holt — Rock bouncer racer, broadcaster and owner of High Society Off-Road · Dave Cole — Founder, King of the Hammers · Robert Wilson — Strategic Partnership Manager, Boxo USA

Alex Striler runs SponsorshipTactics.com, a video library of motorsports sponsorship sessions with the brands that write the checks. Quotes come from recorded Sponsorship Summit sessions and interviews, lightly edited for clarity and length. Click any "Watch" link to see the speaker say it.

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