

Association Corporate Sponsorship Case Studies

ICMA Transforms Its Sponsorship Program into a Partnership Program Supported by Staff Collaboration

May 2024

Jeremy Figoten, CAE, envisioned transforming the International City/County Management Association's (ICMA) event sponsorships into year-round partnerships. As Managing Director of Conferences and Partnerships, he believed mutually beneficial partnerships would help ICMA and its corporate supporters better share resources and advance their missions.

However, this ambitious plan required the cooperation of departments across the association. The resulting collaboration led to “amazing revenue success”—an outcome your association can also achieve by following ICMA's lead.

For leadership buy-in, gather data that supports your plan

ICMA wanted to generate a more diversified, consistent revenue stream that lessened their reliance on members' wallets. They brought in JSB Partnership Consultants to help them transform their sponsorship program from an “a la carte,” event-based approach to customized, year-long partnerships.

Dan Kowitz, Founder and CEO of JSB, recommended first conducting research into member needs, sponsorship opportunities, and the competition for sponsors' budgets. With this data in hand, Jeremy would have more success getting leadership and staff buy-in.

“Leadership buy-in ensures your program is viewed as a priority within the organization,” said Dan. “Bring leaders into the conversation early—when you're beginning to research a new program.”

Conduct research to understand association assets, member needs, and partnership possibilities

Research began with a deep dive into the ICMA strategic plan, website (including the members-only sections), and member and conference attendee surveys. To get a sense of the member experience, JSB staff received newsletters and online community digests during the project.

In his interviews with ICMA staff and sponsors, Bruce Rosenthal, a sponsorship consultant with JSB, gathered the data required to make a case for a new partnership strategy. Staff interviews uncovered corporate revenue streams across the association and the value ICMA could offer partners from existing assets.

The JSB team helped the ICMA staff identify opportunities for new sponsorship offerings, such as blog posts, podcasts, and webinars, which would help fill content gaps and provide additional value to members. Sponsors expressed their preference for customized partnerships in which they could share their expertise through content for members.

Jeremy said, “Equating what members want—case studies, toolkits, resource materials—to what partners can provide is essential. It's not just what the staff and I are saying. Members are asking for these revenue-generating opportunities—this sponsored content. When I put that data in front of my

CEO, it became an easy discussion at the board level, and for gaining resources [to support the ICMA sponsorship program] in year two.”

Research and interviews with corporate sponsors and ICMA staff revealed that sponsors were spending their marketing dollars on partnership programs at competing municipal associations. Competitive analysis is a persuasive tool for gaining leadership buy-in.

Minimize staff resistance by involving them in the partnership project

The main challenge for Jeremy was assuaging two of his colleagues’ concerns:

- Jeremy’s team would take over relationships with “their” people
- The new partnership program would cut into their department’s revenue streams

Jeremy’s team-building approach turned this natural territorialism into collaboration. He started with one-on-one meetings with department heads. “Just ask questions,” he said. “What do you like in the current program? What are your goals? What initiatives do you have? Let them talk. Let them complain. When you simply ask questions and listen, you get a lot of information and suggestions.”

Everyone benefited from developing this culture of collaboration. “When staff help to build a new partnership program, it ensures the program serves their needs too,” said Bruce.

The mindset about sponsorship shifted. It was no longer Jeremy’s program. It was ICMA’s program, a program that would deliver value to members and generate revenue for departments. Jeremy never hesitates to remind his co-workers that this new revenue allows them to hire people, generate content valued by members, and work on new initiatives.

“With staff participation, you don’t have to do everything,” said Jeremy. He likens his teamwork model to the “all hands on deck” approach associations take for their annual conferences. Partners also prefer a coordinated team approach instead of having multiple points of contact and contracts.

Change the sales mindset

Jeremy advises associations to honestly assess the time commitment and staff resources required for a partnership program. “Selling partnerships is time intensive. It requires a deeper understanding of each partner’s business objectives and priorities for the next 18-24 months.”

Transitioning from transactional sales to partnership sales requires different sales skills. Sales people must know how to design proposals and partnerships that make business sense.

“Don’t pigeonhole yourself or your potential partner with set pricing options,” said Jeremy. “We don’t put pricing on our website. It’s customized. If the company only has \$20,000 to spend, I can make that work. If they have \$30,000, I can make that work too.”

Staff must also understand how to manage these deeper relationships. The relationship doesn’t end when the deal closes, it continues throughout the year. For example, staff must know how to teach partners to leverage opportunities to achieve their business goals and how to get feedback from partners about the program.

Maintain team momentum

Staff commitment to the partnership program will naturally ebb if you don't strive to maintain it at a high level. In regular updates, show the correlation between their involvement in the program and the increased revenue and membership value the program is delivering.

Schedule regular check-ins with colleagues. Be open to their input and any changes they suggest. "What assets do they have that you can sell? Ten times out of ten, I hear things in these conversations that I didn't know about," said Jeremy. "If the professional development team is launching a new certificate course, we want to know because a lot of partners might be able to help with that. It's always helpful to know what's happening, whether it's actually happening or merely a thought."

Collaboration leads to success for the entire association

JSB helped ICMA identify and price new sponsorship assets, which led to the development of new types of [partnerships](#). With the same number of sponsors and partners, revenue in the program's first year increased by more than \$750,000.

"Everyone at ICMA is thrilled about the revenue increase, of course," said Jeremy. "Partners appreciate our new streamlined and coordinated approach. They're not being assailed by multiple departments for the same pot of money."

Bruce said, "Beyond revenue, one of the value propositions of a corporate partnership is providing content your members want, but your association doesn't have the expertise or capacity to offer."

ICMA is delivering content from partners that, according to the data, has been a hit with members.

- Record-breaking registration for a webinar about AI for city and county managers
- Strong open rates and forwards for an e-newsletter focused community growth and development
- Highest attendance for an education session on how AI is transforming the resident experience that featured case studies from cities
- Strong performance for podcast episodes about local government workforce trends

And when content from partners meets members' need, companies see the value in partnering with ICMA to be positioned as a knowledge leader.

Never let up on illustrating the financial impact of your association's partners. Bruce said. "During staff meetings, talk about partnership revenue and what it means to your association." Partnership programs bring in revenue that allows your association to fund initiatives, deliver value to members, and hire team members.

EDUCAUSE Launches New Corporate Program to Create More Strategic Engagements: New Model Designed to Provide More Sustainable Value to Partners

August 2024

Leah Lang, Director of Corporate Engagement at EDUCAUSE — a nonprofit association dedicated to advancing the strategic use of technology and data in higher education — approached JSB Partnership Consultants with a challenge: "reimagining the corporate experience for EDUCAUSE."

Dan Kowitz, Founder & CEO of JSB, discussed with Lang opportunities for creating a program that would help partners think differently about their investments with EDUCAUSE, while also creating a more sustainable non-dues revenue program by leveraging EDUCAUSE's prominent position in the industry.

The primary objectives of the EDUCAUSE/JSB collaboration were to:

- Develop a corporate partner program grounded in a strategic business model.
- Transition from transactional “let’s-sell-this” interactions that left companies feeling “put upon” to a more relationship-focused model built on strategic engagements that align partner goals with EDUCAUSE goals.
- Ensure the new corporate partner program supports EDUCAUSE's member programs, including its diversity, equity, and inclusion initiative.
- Integrate the new corporate engagement program into EDUCAUSE's change management process and identify growth-oriented, career-enhancing roles for the corporate engagement/sales team.

It was also established that first-and-foremost the new corporate partnership program would be in alignment with EDUCAUSE's mission “to advance the strategic use of technology and data to further the promise of higher education.”

Lang pointed out that her background is in helping membership; her corporate engagement team's focus was on companies. Kowitz observed, “Bringing these two focuses together would be a win-win for both audiences.”

Program Development Begins with Research and Interviews

JSB's team began by conducting a thorough study of EDUCAUSE's corporate revenue from all sources and for all EDUCAUSE products and services. Next, JSB did a comprehensive audit and assessment of everything EDUCAUSE offered or could offer to corporate partners. These analyses provided a useful marketplace breakdown of what was selling, what was not selling, what each company was buying, and what could be offered to corporate partners.

This was followed by interviews with EDUCAUSE staff and corporate partners to gather insights and ideas for the new program. Staff interviews highlighted the perception that sponsorships and partnerships provided not only revenue but also content and program support for EDUCAUSE. Corporate partners expressed a strong interest in targeting specific audience segments within the EDUCAUSE membership. The interviews also helped to gain buy-in from these stakeholder groups for the new corporate partnership program.

JSB conducted a competitive analysis, identifying over 60 competitors vying for the attention of EDUCAUSE's corporate supporters, including other associations, trade publications, and event, expo, and webinar producers. Additionally, some corporate supporters conducted their own educational outreach via webinars, white papers, and social media.

The JSB team used the findings from the financial, assets, and interview research – along with benchmark information from other associations' successful corporate partnership programs – to develop strategy and structure recommendations for EDUCAUSE's new Corporate Engagement Program. The recommendations included a process to package and price corporate partnerships.

New Partnership Program Offers Value to Companies and Members

Lang explained, “By bundling items, the new program simplifies things for our corporate partners. They don’t have to pick and choose and guess which options will have the most impact. We’ve curated the most meaningful items for them, and they’re grateful for it.”

One of EDUCAUSE’s long-time corporate supporters quickly adopted the new program. Cathy Bates, Senior Principal and Associate Partner at Vantage Technology Consulting Group, remarked, “This is not just another sponsorship program. The EDUCAUSE corporate program offers a unique opportunity.”

Lang added, “The new program better aligns our members with companies truly invested in the mission of higher education, both financially and philosophically. It builds trust between members and suppliers by reducing one-off, hard sales, and promotions.”

Comparing EDUCAUSE’s experience with other associations, Kowitz noted that other associations’ corporate sponsors often express frustration with multiple sales calls from association staff and their sales agencies. One marketing executive said, “We’re absolutely interested in a year-round model rather than a piece-by-piece approach.”

Lang elaborated, “The new annual program helps companies maintain a consistent message throughout the year; previously, most partners were engaging only once or twice with minimal effect.”

She also emphasized the program’s dual benefit: delivering more value to partners while solidifying revenue streams to support meaningful programming for members.

Corporate Engagement Program Addresses Each Company’s Needs

The EDUCAUSE Corporate Engagement Program offers packages tailored to each company’s business objectives and marketing goals, featuring:

- Year-round engagement with each partner’s target market
- Strategic brand and thought leadership showcases
- Direct access to technology decision-makers
- An efficient way for partners to achieve their goals

After a few months in the program, Bates from Vantage observed, “We believe in what the new program can do. The partnership model reflects our shared values with EDUCAUSE and the way we work collaboratively with the higher education community.”

Kowitz concluded, “the JSB team is providing the EDUCAUSE staff with training and coaching to take the Corporate Engagement Program to market and implement the program.”

10 Steps to a Successful Corporate Sponsorship Program

October 15, 2021

The Academy of Medical-Surgical Nurses (AMSN) has created a corporate partnership relationship with Medtronic that provides significant value for members and AMSN, as well as Medtronic.

AMSN CEO Terri Hinkley, EdD, MBA, BScN, RN, CAE, said, “We weren’t seeing much growth in sponsor revenue and I realized we needed a new strategy, a strategy that involved partnerships with a select group of companies that serve our members.”

Hinkley added, “while the pandemic could be perceived as a barrier to expanding partnerships, we saw this as an opportunity to strengthen AMSN’s and Medtronic’s support for medical-surgical nurses who are caring for acutely ill patients.”

Here is how AMSN changed from platinum/gold/silver conference sponsorship packages to a program that offers year-long, customized Premier Partnerships.

1) Interviews with AMSN’s sponsors revealed that the several-day AMSN Annual Convention did little to fulfill the marketing goals of some companies. AMSN created a new business model; the Premier Partner program is a year-long collaboration between AMSN and companies.

2) Research showed that some of AMSN’s conference sponsors derived minimal value from transactional benefits – like booths, ads, and signage – at AMSN’s convention. AMSN added to its offerings for Premier Partners a wide range of opportunities that would help members and position companies as thought leaders. For example, opportunities for Premier Partners include content dissemination; co-created content; surveys; focus groups; executive roundtables; research; social media campaigns; and more.

3) To ensure that the new Premier Partner program was in alignment with AMSN’s mission and values, AMSN’s staff identified members’ primary needs. This was in 2020 – the early months of the pandemic – and med-surg nurses needed information and resources to better care for their patients.

4) The next step for AMSN was an exploratory conversation with Medtronic’s leadership. The call was not a typical “sponsorship sales call” based on a prospectus. It was a discussion to identify Medtronic’s business and marketing needs and how Medtronic could support AMSN’s members. According to Michael Noble MBA, Principal U.S. Field Marketing Strategist, Respiratory Compromise at Medtronic, “this was a unique value proposition we saw in the AMSN Premier Partner program. AMSN proactively reached out to us, at Medtronic, and asked how we can better partner in supporting each other’s organizational goals. I consider this as a best practice for societies and vendors as it truly shows a two-way partnership.”

5) Based on the AMSN and Medtronic discussion, AMSN developed a pre-proposal aligned with Medtronic’s business and marketing needs and the needs of AMSN’s members. AMSN and Medtronic had another call to discuss and fine-tune the partnership proposal.

6) AMSN developed a full Premier Partner proposal for Medtronic and had another discussion with the Medtronic team to be sure the proposal was in alignment with Medtronic’s business needs and AMSN’s mission.

7) To finalize the partnership, AMSN created a contract agreement based on the terms and deliverables in the proposal. The partnership was official!

8) Now that the Premier Partner agreement was signed, this was just the beginning of the partnership. AMSN’s staff set up a process of servicing the partnership like a marketing agency would service a client. An account executive is in charge of monitoring the partnership with Medtronic; others on the AMSN staff have responsibilities for delivering the benefits.

9) AMSN went one step further in servicing the partnership like a marketing agency. AMSN’s staff created a private project management website exclusively for Medtronic to show and track Medtronic’s Premier Partner benefits, analytics, meeting notes, key dates, etc.

10) The first year of the partnership began in mid-2020; Medtronic and AMSN recently updated and renewed the partnership for a second year.

Was this a long process to establish the new Premier Partner program especially with the pressures of the pandemic? AMSN's Hinkley explains, "this is a time-consuming process and AMSN doesn't have a large staff, however, the benefits of partnership make it very worthwhile. Creating the Premier Partner program has added extraordinary value for our members and – by extension – value for our association."

Medtronic's Noble added, "the AMSN Premier Partner program has helped our company achieve visibility and thought leadership throughout the year and showcase our commitment to patient safety. Medtronic's partnership with AMSN has been a sound business decision."

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