

A Win-Win Situation

Sponsorships and endorsements can benefit both parties when structured and managed correctly.

By Robyn Volkening



When a trainer endorses a product and receives sponsored gear, it can be good for both the rider and the company. Using top-of-the-line equipment such as 5 Star Equine Products gives riders like Matt Budge a professional image, and in return, he helps ensure the company's products are seen in the show pen.

Suzanne Forrest

Logos, logos, everywhere you look. Stall curtains, trailers, even top trainers' shirts showcase company brand affiliations. The performance horse industry, while not as visibly branded with company insignias as NASCAR, is definitely powered by the arrangements between professional trainers, rodeo athletes and the corporations making products.

When a well-known company puts its logo on a trainer's shirt or trailer, it can seem like that trainer has hit the "big time," adding some perceived legitimacy to the program. But how does a sponsorship situation work best? What are the benefits? How does a trainer seek or keep a sponsor?

What's best for both?

The words "relationship" and "partnership" come up often while discussing endorsement or sponsorship, from both sides of the table. While getting an endorsement is nice, it is a professional arrangement and should be treated as such, with ongoing attention to the business side of things in order to keep the deal going strong.

Trainers and companies need to evaluate the pros and cons of their potential relationship ahead of time, as well as construct appropriate agreements (contracts are highly advised for both sides) and plan ahead on how to proactively maximize the partnership and build upon it over time. In order for this situation to work well, there needs to

be a benefit to the company/brand and also the trainer. Like any relationship, ongoing effort and communication creates the best outcome.

Companies wanting to sell more merchandise have found working with professionals in the equine world can help in a variety of ways. Professionals can test or help develop products, get the finished items out in the arena (exposure), promote it to clients and fans, and add legitimacy to a company's offerings, whether it is saddles, clothing, boots, feed or even larger items such as trailers. However, the end goal is still to make money. Trainers who seek to develop new or stronger sponsorships need to keep that in mind; the company doesn't sponsor them

just so they can hang out in the stall area at shows. They need help to increase sales and build profits. A trainer who is successful in seeking or keeping sponsors will always keep that at the forefront of his or her mind.

On the other side, many trainers believe having big brands standing behind them shows their potential clients they have made it. And while having corporate support can be advantageous, in the Western performance horse world, large cash compensation is rarely involved with sponsorships, unlike professional ball sports. Trainers aren't making millions endorsing the latest shoe brand or beverage, like National Football League and National Basketball Association players do. However, in-kind (product) sponsorships can help a trainer get the best or latest saddles, gear, boots, clothing, feed and the like without affecting their bottom line. Showing up with new products helps keep up appearances, and in-kind sponsorships can accomplish that without a trainer having to open up his wallet.

Sometimes a cash bonus for winning a large event or achieving a sales goal can be negotiated as part of the agreement. Ongoing sponsorships can include commissions or other compensation as a trainer proves his worth to a company, and can vary based on what works for the specific company and product line. A trainer should always seek to actually "sell" product, proactively taking time to educate potential customers and referring their clients and those who inquire as to where to purchase the items they endorse and recommend. Just wearing the logo and using the product isn't usually enough to prove value anymore. It's always a good idea to casually keep track of these interactions to prepare data for future contract renewals and negotiations.

At 5 Star Equine Products, owner Terry Moore said endorsement deals need to be "part of their marketing plan, not stand alone," and he has both sought endorsees and had them come to him. He said 5 Star's sponsored trainers and athletes help sales a great deal by using the products and getting them out in front of consumers; however, before they agree to work with someone, they make sure they have additional money in the marketing budget set aside to promote the person, utilize him or her in advertisements and on social media, and directly market in that discipline to maximize impact. Just having the person use the product isn't enough to make an impact – the endorsee has to make



While 5 Star Equine Products owner Terry Moore wants potential endorsees to be quality horsemen at the top of their game, it is also important that those trainers have the respect of their peers. Gerald Alexander, for example, is known as one of the best 2-year-old trainers in the cutting business, so Moore was happy to add the horseman to his roster.

an effort to promote 5 Star, and the company has to proactively use the athlete in marketing and public relations efforts, as well.

When a trainer wants to work with a company, asking about its marketing plans shows business acumen and concern for the success of its promotion efforts. If a company doesn't have intentions of having the trainer as part of a wider effort, success is often harder to achieve or quantify, which hurts in future endorsement renewal efforts.

Moore said when considering a potential endorsee, the candidates have to be at the top of their game. They are "more valuable" if they have a strong social media presence, but they need to be "not just the most popular."

"They need to not only be good horsemen, but have the respect of their peers, be honest and believable when they endorse our product, and most importantly, also be proactive working for us, not just want free product," Moore said.

Moore added he is cautious about adding new athletes to the 5 Star roster, as they

want to make the best use out of the partnerships they have and endorsement is only part of their marketing plan for their saddles, pads and tack. Trainers or athletes that have invested in themselves with "added value," such as training videos, television spots, clinics, etc., intrigue him when he is considering a new partnership, as these opportunities add additional exposure for 5 Star products and the company brand. As long as a current sponsored trainer or competitor keeps hauling, keeps his or her name up and promotes 5 Star products, they remain on the 5 Star Equine team.

At Platinum Performance, Equine Marketing Manager Lauren Thompson said they prefer to form long-term relationships with endorsees, whom they call "ambassadors," and only select them from existing professional clients who have been using Platinum products in their barns for some time. She said it's usually a "natural evolution" from long-standing client to ambassador because they want to ensure the trainer



or rodeo athlete truly believes in Platinum Performance products and what it does to help their horses' health.

Thompson mentioned the partnership goes both ways, as Platinum Performance uses its nutritional expertise to help ambassadors with specific horses and maximize each individual's performance. The company has a wide roster of Platinum ambassadors in a variety of disciplines, and capitalizes on their impact via print advertisements, events, social media and more, making the endorseses part of a multi-faceted integrated marketing campaign.

The trainer/salesman

From a trainer's perspective, it makes sense to try to gain sponsorships on products they already like and use. The big categories are often saddles, saddle pads, leg boots,

(right) Platinum Performance requires its endorsees to have been longtime customers in an effort to ensure they believe in the benefits of the product. That sincere confidence in what the company offers earns sponsored riders like Todd Bergen the title of "ambassador" for Platinum.



Courtesy of Platinum Performance

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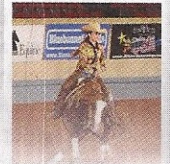
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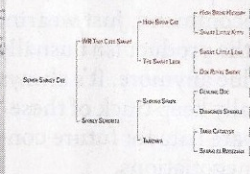


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human clothing, hats, boots, trailers, blankets, supplements and feed. But if their preferred company isn't seeking new endorsees, does it make sense to try to get sponsored by a different brand in that category and then try to switch later?

While trainers and companies both have changing priorities and some relationships work better than others, it is always better to portray yourself in the best light and build a personal brand of integrity. Gaining sponsorships from top companies is competitive. Many trainers and rodeo athletes are vying for the same product endorsements. Most companies will do their due diligence into your background and will see past sponsorships, social media transgressions and bad press. They will also not look favorably on "logo jumpers" who are representing a new brand every other year. It doesn't show loyalty or commitment, and paints intentions in a selfish light.

Champion reining and cow horse trainer Bob Avila cautioned, "Don't do it just for the dollar, it never ends up well."

With some of the longest and strongest

brand endorsements in the performance horse industry, Avila related he has been with Professional's Choice for 30 years, and most of his sponsorships have been in place more than 20 years with some of the biggest brands in the industry such as Cinch, Rios of Mercedes boots, Bloomer trailers and Bob's Custom Saddles, among others. His key insight for trainers is, "Don't ever endorse anything you don't really believe in." He insisted that anything he endorses he would buy, even if he wasn't sponsored, and he said it is better to buy your favorite product at full retail price than accept a sponsorship from a company you can't wholeheartedly support.

Avila reminded trainers that in order to build long-term relationships, the brand must be part of their lifestyle 100 percent. A trainer should give back, too, including calling and being proactive in asking sponsors what they need, rather than waiting for the company to call first. Avila spends his own money to travel to the corporate offices and industry events to learn about the products, show his support and assist with trade shows and retail events, which builds a rapport with

Trainer Tip

To maximize success in pitching to companies, trainers should proactively build their personal brands and package them, either in print or digitally, to make a professional presentation. Keeping track of wins, investing in high-quality photo and video shoots, and maintaining a website and social media profiles are all important in building a personal brand and putting their best image forward when approaching target companies. Don't forget to get copyright releases and unlimited usage agreements so you own, and can let your sponsors use, any photographs or videos that were created by professionals.

the company and strengthens relationships with the employees he works with.

Before Avila seeks a partnership with a company, he wants to 1) like their products, 2) be committed to helping them grow their business and his together and 3) be proud to be linked with that company in the future.

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2010 gray grandson of Playgun pretty head horse
- Lot 106 | POWERS, MARTY | JD WARLOCK | AQHA, \$14,700.00
2009 dun gelding by Genuine 007- Head horse
- Lot 15 | KOONTZ, ORREN | TK PURE WHISKEY | AQHA, \$13,000.00
2009 palomino gelding grandson of Paddys Irish Whiskey-Ranch, team rope horse
- Lot 73 | HEADINGS, CLINT | TOBYS ROCKY OTOE | AQHA, \$10,000.00,
2008 gray gelding grandson of Otoes Rainbow- team rope

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Courtesy of Platinum Performance



Boyd Rice, who is an ambassador for Platinum Performance, regularly competes in cutting and reined cow horse. That versatility allows his sponsors' products to be seen more frequently by different groups, making him an ideal candidate to seek sponsorships.

Primo Morales



Bob Avila, who has long-standing relationships with his sponsors, only endorses a product he believes in, and he makes his sponsors' brands part of his everyday life. "Don't do it just for the dollar," he said.

Avila said making sure he worked with strong companies, even when they were smaller and in growth mode, helped him build his successful business and brand, as well. Even on vacation, he wears the clothing and accessory brands he endorses because they are "part of my life, all the time, not just when I'm on a horse or the cameras are there."

If anyone were to visit his barn, they wouldn't find a competitor's product, because he has loyalty and commitment to the companies that have supported him for the long-term. He sees his business success linked to theirs.

So how should a trainer approach companies about sponsorships? Doing research on target companies can help. Looking at companies with many endorsees may seem like the obvious choice, but a trainer might have better luck finding a smaller company that doesn't have as many existing relationships. Seek out products you like. Avid users of a product, even outside the horse industry, should do the research and develop a plan of how you might help the company with exposure and increased sales. The more you know about their products and business goals, the better position you will be in to impress the decision-makers. Write down a plan and seek out contacts within the company. Utilize a "presentation kit" (see sidebar) in an email, and try to set up a phone, Skype or in-person meeting to pitch the partnership proposal.

In this business environment, it's important to show the ability to embrace technology. With cell phones, it is easy to present a video speaking about yourself and what you have to offer the company. Keep in mind their goal is to sell. They want to see how you interact with the public and how you will portray their products and represent them. How will this particular sponsorship help their company? Specifically, which products do you like? Why? Use statistics, such as lifetime earnings, number of shows attended and quantity of social media fans, but also show your personality and your own unique brand to sell yourself and stand out from the crowd.

Endorsement and sponsorship are a huge part of sports, including the Western performance horse industry. With the right business mindset and ongoing communication, both sides of the partnership can benefit from working together to promote their respective products and brands. ★