



# The Sponsorship SEARCH

How to find and develop win-win relationships.

*By Jennifer Mellace*

**D**o you ever wonder how Olympic team members get their sponsors? As you might imagine, top competitors offer great exposure for companies looking to market their brands to the dressage world. But those same companies aren't after just the top dogs. In fact, up-and-coming riders, those who have proven themselves in their own dressage community, are also appealing to companies looking for a mutually beneficial relationship. And when done right, the relationship is a win-win for everyone.

Corporate sponsorships help furnish competitors with equipment, clothing, feed and veterinary care for their horses, and other essential riding and competition gear. Most manufacturers aren't in the business of monetary sponsorships, but many offer free products and a mention on their website and in marketing materi-

als. In return, sponsors receive testimonials and recognition from the rider on his or her website and blog, on saddle pads, clothing and more.

## **Are You Eligible?**

Before you begin looking for a sponsorship deal, there are a few questions you must ask. Most importantly, are you eligible to receive that company's type of sponsorship? According to the U.S. Equestrian Federation (USEF) rules (Chapter 13, GR1306), amateurs are not allowed to accept remuneration for the



Arnd Bronkhorst

happen right away. Havre recently acquired her first sponsor—Transfeeder, makers of Highbred Easy Feed horse hay—after being a client for more than two years. “It is a relationship you build through experience with a company,” she says. “This could be your veterinarian, a feed supplement, saddle brand or media company. They need to get to know you, and you them, and the benefits need to be a win-win. When you feel you can genuinely benefit another’s business and/or goals, then it’s time.”

After using Transfeeder for several years, Havre approached them with a written proposal. “I feel it is important to present yourself in a professional manner,” she says. “It’s also important to highlight the benefits that the sponsorship will have for both the rider and the sponsor.” She used Transfeeder’s product because her horse, Cajetano, used to be very prone to colic and needed consistency and high quality. “It is important for me to believe and stand behind whatever I do. So who better to team up with than a company I have had such great results with?”

As part of the sponsorship, Transfeeder provides Havre with hay for her horse, saving her more than \$250 each month. With these savings, she has been able to invest in further education, including clinics. “It is so tough to find companies that are willing to sponsor nonprofessionals working towards professional goals,”

she says. “Dressage is a sport that takes a long time to learn and a lot of money and time need to be invested.”

Havre does her best to market Transfeeder in several ways. “I own The Dressage Boutique & Equestrian Wear



Courtesy Dr. Cetty Weiss

use of his or her name, photograph or other form of personal association as a horseman in connection with any advertisement or article (including but not limited to clothing, product, equipment, etc.) to be sold. However, there are some activities that do not affect amateur status, including accepting reimbursement for any expenses directly related to the horse (e.g., farrier/vet bills, entries).

These rules are complex and offer many restrictions. If you’re not sure of your eligibility, clarifications on the amateur’s rules are answered in writing,

and USEF members are directed to send their questions regarding these rules to [amateurinquiry@usef.org](mailto:amateurinquiry@usef.org).

### Choosing a Sponsor

The next question you need to ask yourself is how do you know when it’s the right time to seek a sponsor? Christel Havre, a dressage rider in Alberta, Canada, reminds riders that it doesn’t



Courtesy Briarwood Photography

**Christel Havre rides her 16-year-old Holsteiner Cajetano. Havre is sponsored by a hay supplier in Alberta, Canada.**

[an online and mobile tack shop] and am lucky enough to be able to market their product through my riding at shows and clinics, and also at the store. I advertise for them on my website, carry informational brochures in my mobile boutique, embroider their logo on my saddle pads and speak openly to customers about their product and the benefits I have experienced.”

Mary Cobey, marketing representative for Kerrits Performance Equestrian Apparel, stresses how important it is that a sponsorship work for both parties involved. Kerrits offers two types of sponsorships—Team Riders and the Ambassadors Program. “Our Team Riders compete in higher levels of their respective disciplines,” says Cobey. “They don’t necessarily have to be top-ranked, but they do have to be outstanding members of their equestrian community. They must have a positive attitude and bolster the sport with great horsemanship and ethics. We want people to be able to

identify with our Team Riders and realize that through hard work and dedication they can achieve the same goals.”

Kerrit’s Team Rider Lauren Chumley, an assistant trainer at Silke Rembacz Dressage, in Flemington, New Jersey, had been training, riding and selling dressage horses in a professional manner for several years before being sponsored by Kerrits. “I had been considering pursuing some sort of sponsorship when my name was volunteered by the owner of my local tack shop,” says Chumley. “I had developed a client base and established a presence in the dressage community in our area and was ready and eager to align myself with a company. Kerrits and I were a good match from the beginning as we shared a vision regarding promotion and competition.”

The Kerrit’s Ambassador Program is less formal and more available to riders who love the Kerrits line and wish to promote the product in their daily activities. “We wanted to showcase in-

dividuals who weren’t a great fit for our Team Riders Program, but still had a lot to offer,” says Cobey. “Our Ambassador Program gives folks a platform to share ideas, but also gives us great feedback.”

Riders also need to be realistic in what they offer, says Cobey. “You can’t say you’re going to win this, this and this. But you do need to be part of your horse community and go that extra step to help. You have to have character and smile even when you have a bad ride. Good sportsmanship goes a long way.”

Chumley agrees and takes the extra step to keep her sponsors apprised of her schedule. “To endorse a company, people have to know who you are. The company will need to know what you’re doing, how well you’re doing it and where you’ll be. I regularly send Kerrits show schedules, results and the locations I’ll be working in. If I attend or teach a clinic, compete at a local dressage show or go to a big national championship, they know about it. Most professionals are exceptionally busy, so taking the time to e-mail or call the company is sometimes difficult, but it is of vital importance. Lastly, attitude is everything. You must be dedicated to your shared visions regarding mutual promotion. The sacrifices are insignificant when compared to the benefits of being backed by a sponsor.”

### **Market Yourself**

The ability to market yourself is another key factor in garnering sponsorships. While some riders can employ marketing or PR firms to help, many must figure it out on their own. And while you may balk at the idea of marketing, sponsors are going to be looking for folks who can tout their own name as well as that of their sponsors. For instance, riders who possess writing skills often have their own blog and write their own press releases. If writing isn’t your forte, use your other skills and resources—try

## The Top 5 Items to Include in Your Sponsorship Proposal

Lisa Schroeder is the owner and marketing specialist behind Markitect Consulting, a strategic marketing consultancy that specializes in equine business, sport and sponsorship marketing. She is also an amateur dressage rider and competitor. With more than eight years of professional experience in the field of marketing communications, from small business start-ups to international manufacturers, Lisa helps riders understand the importance of professionalism and the need to give back to their sport and supporters.

Here are five essential elements she recommends including in a sponsorship proposal.

1. If you submit a proposal to non-horse-related readers, make sure you keep the dressage/equine jargon to a minimum. Simply include a concise, well-written description of the sport's history.

2. Include your riding accomplishments and goals, but don't forget other areas of personal interest. Give them your show/event calendar for the coming year and include testimonials from other sponsors or those you've worked with closely.

3. Include images of yourself, your horse and items you describe in your sponsor section, such as if you are promoting logo space on your trailer, saddle pads or show sheets. Why not have a photo showing the potential placement and size? This will help the sponsor visualize the opportunities you are proposing.

4. Whether you are an amateur or professional rider, you have marketing assets that you may not even realize are there, such as a website, social media accounts and membership in groups or organizations. These are all marketing assets. The number of people you are able to reach or have regular contact with (within the equestrian community and beyond) is a quantifiable statistic you can include in your proposal. The goal is to demonstrate the scope of the audience you can provide a potential sponsor.

5. When drafting your sponsorship "wish list" and creating the monetary levels, be sure to clearly define the benefits within each level. You want to give the impression of a well-organized and professional athletic investment. First impressions are vital, especially if you aren't able to be there in person.

volunteering as a demo rider at local charity events or offer to help organize a special event or show. It's also important to get involved in your local U.S. Dressage Federation (USDF) Group Membership Organization (GMO) and perhaps even sit on the board. While sponsors want to see you having fun

in the show ring, they also need to see that you have credibility. Being actively involved in your local dressage community is one way to do this.

Another great tool is word of mouth. Work on building relationships through your riding and volunteering with people who might sponsor you or

## Funding for Young Riders and Professionals

**R**enee Isler is an active adult amateur dressage competitor and creator/founder of the Renee Isler Dressage Support Fund at The Dressage Foundation. "It all started about four years ago," says Isler. "I wanted to do something to help Junior/Young Riders who possibly did not have the funds to get quality training and attend competitions and/or clinics. I started speaking with Gil Merrick [former U.S. Equestrian Federation High Performance Dressage Director] about how to accomplish this, and he sent me to The Dressage Foundation."

While much support has come through The Dressage Foundation, Isler has also assisted many riders directly.



Courtesy: Brigitte Voelk

**Renee Isler and Lightning, her 16-year-old Hanoverian gelding, compete at Prix St. Georges.**

"When I was younger, I never had any money, so riding opportunities were few and far between. I swore when I got older I would have horses and ride. I also wanted to help others like me who didn't have an opportunity to ride, but had a great work ethic and are amazing people in general, like Courtney." Isler has directly sponsored Courtney King-Dye as well as Liz Austin, Shannon Dueck, Jocelyn Wiese and others.

When it comes time to select riders, Isler makes sure their work ethic is top notch. "I feel sometimes that Young Riders and professionals alike do not really understand what work ethic means," she says. "People will just come to me and ask for money and have no plan, no budget, no offer of giving back or have never volunteered. I come from the business world, where you are

accountable for your actions and have to work for what you get. In my eyes, honesty, integrity and being polite go a long way."

When it comes time to seek a scholarship, Isler stresses the importance of being prepared. She has created a template for gathering essential information and then formulating a business plan, budget and other details. Her tips include:

**1. Find out what the sponsor represents**, what they believe in, what their cause is. You don't go to a job interview without knowing about the company to which you are applying.

**2. Be prepared.** Create a business plan and budget so people know what you are looking for, how you plan to spend the money and what you have done to contribute to that budget. Know your goals but also be prepared to answer how you are going to get there.

**3. Ask what you can do for that sponsor**, not what they can do for you. Most importantly, see how you can give back to that organization or the sport in general.

**4. School is also important.** "I see a lot of kids finish high school with no plans to go to college," says Isler. "This, to me, is a big mistake. Very few people make it to the Olympics." Keep in mind that horses are animals and you could sustain an injury that would make it difficult or impossible to ride or teach. What would you do then? Or after a few years you may decide that the horse business is not for you. Look at top college athletes. How many make it to the pros? Even when they do, many have career-ending injuries.

**5. Work, work, work.** "I want to see that someone is trying to make money on his or her own," Isler says. "This I say mostly to the Young Riders. This is so cliché but when I was younger, I worked three jobs while attending school."

Isler advocates supporting riders at all levels, from young children on ponies to Olympians on their own or sponsored horses. "A way to accomplish this was to work with U.S. Dressage Federation and U.S. Equestrian Federation members and trainers to see where the money is needed. I have discussed many options with Lendon Gray and Anne Gribbons and have since opened the fund to include professionals, people who want to do clinics, really anybody who meets the criteria."

To learn more about the Renee Isler Dressage Support Fund, visit [islerdressage.com](http://islerdressage.com) or e-mail [ReneeIsler@aol.com](mailto:ReneeIsler@aol.com).



Courtesy Nikki Serge

**Lauren Chumley, pictured with Millenium, is sponsored by Kerrits.**

put in a good word as a reference.

When it comes to selecting sponsors for HorseTech—manufacturer of horse supplements including Glänzen—owner Rodney Johnson relies on recommendations and gut instinct. “If I’m going to put my name behind a rider, I want him or her to be a nice person,” he says. “I rely on those I trust to point me toward the right people, and I rely on how I feel when I meet them. I treat a potential candidate as if I were hiring them to work in the office next to me. If I feel they would make a good employee, then I know they’ll be a good ambassador for my products.”

Johnson relies on the many top-level dressage riders he sponsors to be his trusted advisors. “These competitors have their finger on the pulse of the sport and know who is up and coming and who would be a good match for us,” he says. “So when they tell me to look at a certain rider, I listen.”

Probably the most important advice in seeking a sponsorship is to be sincere. “Seek genuine relationships,” says Havre. “Remember, you become a face of what they represent, so make sure you are in sync with their mission for success. Most importantly, choose a product you love and believe in.” 