



2025 Running USA Industry Conference Panel Discussion: Innovative Business Development Strategies in the Running Event Industry

The Running USA Business Development Strategies Roundtable provided an insightful discussion on creative approaches to event growth, sponsorship engagement, and the role of technology in enhancing race experiences. Industry leaders shared success stories, innovative ideas, and strategies for overcoming common challenges in the running event space.

Leveraging Unique Event Features for Engagement

Panelists highlighted the importance of incorporating unique event elements to drive engagement. One standout example was a race featuring hospital bed races, which gained popularity due to its novelty and entertainment value. Another successful activation involved the use of bib technology and backdrops at the Chicago Marathon, creating popular photo opportunities that enhanced participant experience. The integration of LED screens on race vehicles displaying real-time race data also proved to be a valuable tool for engaging both participants and spectators.

Technology and Data Utilization

The panel emphasized the growing role of technology in race management. One discussed approach involved using EB systems for tracking crowd movement and traffic patterns. This data provided valuable insights into event flow and safety measures. Additionally, technology was used to verify bib numbers and names, ensuring accuracy and efficiency in race logistics. The integration of timing systems and data analytics helped enhance the overall event experience while providing key performance insights for organizers.

Overcoming Sponsorship Challenges

A key discussion point was the challenge of securing sponsorships and demonstrating return on investment (ROI), particularly for smaller races in less populated areas. Panelists stressed the importance of early communication with sponsors and aligning sponsorship opportunities with their marketing goals. Customizing sponsorship packages to meet specific needs and leveraging storytelling to showcase engagement data were suggested as effective strategies. Successful sponsorship activations included interactive expo experiences, such as a tiki station and a sponsor-hosted active series that boosted brand awareness and engagement.

Creative Sponsorship and Partnership Strategies

Panelists shared success stories on engaging sponsors through creative activations and unique partnerships. The Flying Pig Marathon event weekend leveraged its "pig" branding to create sponsorship opportunities that resonated with local businesses. The use of recap decks to showcase event impact and create a sense of urgency among potential sponsors was also highlighted as a valuable strategy. Additionally, engaging key executives in races helped foster stronger sponsor relationships and long-term partnerships.

Volunteer Engagement and Recognition

Volunteer engagement was another critical topic. The discussion explored ways to enhance the volunteer experience, including potential brand partnerships to provide incentives and recognition. Successful examples from international races, such as in Chengdu, China, demonstrated how technology could be used to acknowledge volunteer contributions. Creating a positive and rewarding volunteer experience was identified as a key factor in maintaining event quality and sustainability.

Cross-Event and Cross-Geography Collaborations

The panel also explored the potential for cross-event and cross-geography collaborations to maximize sponsorship reach and enhance runner engagement. One example included a group purchasing initiative to afford advanced technology like Placer AI, which provides valuable event data insights. Another successful strategy involved coordinating sponsorships across multiple events to increase brand visibility and impact. These collaborative efforts were seen as a way to create new opportunities for sponsors while strengthening the running community.

Action Items and Next Steps

To build on these discussions, the panel identified several key action items:

- **Explore group purchasing** opportunities for advanced tracking technologies like Placer AI.
- **Connect with other races** in the region to develop shared sponsorship opportunities.
- **Enhance volunteer engagement** through strategic partnerships and recognition programs.

Tina Muir, a board member of Running USA, concluded the session by encouraging continued collaboration and idea sharing. She invited attendees to join a sustainability panel discussion the following morning, reinforcing the importance of innovation and sustainability in the future of running events. Participants left the panel with actionable insights and new connections, ready to implement these strategies in their own events.