

Sponsors miss the boat with The Girl Event

Esteem Dream wants to promote a positive message to youth, sell product and turn a profit. Isn't that what many corporations do? So why the cold shoulder?

IF JENNIFER HILBORN AND SARAH VARLEY-- organizers of The Girl Event -- could do one thing over again, it just might be to reconsider the name they gave to their new company.

Esteem Dream.

The problem, they discovered, is that when Esteem Dream comes a' knocking on corporate doors, it gets shunted over to the charitable donations committee.

A name like "Creative Experiential Marketing to Teenage Girls Co." might better have caught the ear of marketing directors. It would not have been a stretch, either. That's exactly what Hilborn and Varley are trying to create.

The pair, former global event and sponsorship managers at Ericsson, understand sponsorship marketing. Their goal was to stage a one-day event that would do for teenage girls what motivational seminars do for their parents and teachers, while also providing what Hilbom calls, "an electric marketing opportunity."

The Girl Event, held October 14 at Mississauga's Living Arts Centre, drew a full house of 1,300 girls between the ages of 13 and 18 to hear a variety of presentations revolving around the theme of building self-esteem. Admission was \$19.95 (taxes included) per person. The event was sponsored by the Toronto YWCA, Zellers and Procter & Gamble. It was well covered by all of Toronto's major media. And it lost money.

The event might not have made it off the drawing board had it not been for the Toronto YWCA, which came on as presenting partner when The Girl Event was only an idea without a date or a venue. The YWCA offered financing in the form of a loan.

The association with the YWCA lent credibility to the event. "Once we got them we felt it would be easier to get corporate partners," says Hilbom.

But Varley suspects the opposite happened.

"Unfortunately what it did do as well was misconstrue the idea of who we were," says Varley. "We often got forwarded to the community relations or philanthropy-donations department."

The fact that Esteem Dream was a for profit company also shut a number of doors. As a for-profit, they were unable to tap into any government funding. Even within the private sector, Hilbom says a number of companies said they "wished" Esteem Dream were a charity.

Diane Gordon, Director of Community Investment for the Hudson's Bay Company (parent company of Zellers), describes the property as "a bit of a mix. People are used to being approached with either 'give me a donation' or 'sponsor this event.'" She also suspects potential sponsors were cautious because the property was new, Hilbom and Varley were largely unknown quantities, and the risks were high if the messaging was somehow wrong.

"We brought in our partner from the Canadian Women's Foundation to make sure the messaging was a good message for the girls," she says.

With rights fees topping out at \$ 10,000, the ask was reasonable, especially in light of the target audience and the environment the event would create.

"No company associated with the Girl Event was going to get punished for marketing to the teens because they were doing it in such a responsible way," says Varley.

"Unfortunately, they couldn't get the sexy part of it."

Except, of course, for Procter & Gamble and Zellers.

Procter & Gamble used the event to promote a cooperative of their teen brands, a web presence called lulusroom.ca. Procter & Gamble set up a bank of computers where girls could register on the website, entitling them to merchandise samples, and enter a contest for a free trip.

Zellers linked some of its teen brands, specifically Request and Mossimo, to the event.

"Having the opportunity to link those brands with that event further emphasizes that we've got great teen brands and that we're also helping out with that age group. It also allows us to communicate further what we do with women and women's shelters," says Gordon.

The Girl Event will now go national. That wasn't part of the original plan, says Hilbom, but another lesson learned from this initial foray into the marketplace is that national brands need national exposure. Plans are afoot to stage Girl Events in Vancouver, Calgary, Ottawa and again in Toronto next spring, during the current school year.

That seems fine with Zellers. "We used it as a test to see what opportunities there would be in the future," says Gordon of the first Girl Event. If Zellers continues its partnership -- and early indications are encouraging -- future Girl Events might include fashion shows featuring Zellers brands, and gift cards. At the Mississauga event, Zellers provided a banner for the girls to sign in order to "express themselves." That will likely be repeated at subsequent events, with the banner later displayed at Zellers stores to link back to the event.

If Hilbom and Varley are correct, the results of the inaugural event, including a hoped-for strong sponsor ROI, should finally earn them the attention of the marketing department.