The Sports Sponsorship Guide

Interview with Ben Stur...
many others. And really kind of felt there was a need for property to have a sponsorship agency. And when I say property, that’s referring to leagues, stadiums, teams events, television shows, and other sports properties. Not so much commercial real estate. But its very similar, because what we’re doing here at Leverage is matching up brands together with the sports properties, similar to commercial real estate. That’s what we do, there’s a lot more to it that that, a lot of research, analytics that go behind it to return the investment, analysis. We have a lot of reporting, and most importantly its about relationship building. Its about relationship building with your clients, its about relationship building with brands, its about getting out there. And if you’re not out there, you’re staying inside, and you’re going to let things pass you by. But if you can get out there, I think it’s the most important thing and to visualize and follow the dream that you have and to make it into a reality.

Lewis Howes: Exactly, and I guess I’d say that both of us are pretty big networkers, and we were just actually talking about Keith Ferrazzi from the author of Never Eat Alone, but that’s one of the key points about any business I guess, the more well connected you are, your business is, the relationships you have, the more success you’re going to have. But really quickly, before we get into the questions about sponsorships, what really sets Leverage Agency apart from other companies or other agencies in sports and marketing consulting? Can you talk about that so that people know?

Ben Sturner: Yeah, I think being entrepreneurial, we’re able to still be nimble, we move quickly, there’s not a lot of bureaucracy in our decision making. We’re able to get our decision makers, we’re also in the heart of New York City, on the corner of 48th and 5th Avenue, right in the center of the City. So I think what separates us too, is we have great relationships, not only with the brands but with the advertising agencies, the media buyers, and we also do very well on PR, which is important to bring the sponsorships to life, and to bring creative and digital too. So its more than just the sponsorship, it’s a 360 degree platform.

Lewis Howes: Exactly, and you’ve got the team members, which are the best of the best, which pretty much sets you apart from everyone else. But lets get right into a good question.

Ben Sturner: Just to kind of go with that a little bit. I mean the team is really what makes us who we are, and its not me, but its my team members, and you know I’ve always tried to complement myself with people who are smart than me. Or at least who can complement any of my weaknesses. We’ve got some great people, Ray Katz, who is with the NFL and most recently heading up Omnicom Media Groups Sports, has come on to help run our properties and media division. Kevin Macintyre as VP of Sales, who was with ESPN for a number of years, Bob Donaldson, who heads up our media buying and agency relationships. He was at IMG for 12 years, and we also are working with Gene Goldberg, who runs
property licensing, and was with the NFL for over 20 years. And we’ve got a great staff. We have them, we have some of the most energetic, hardworking team members there is, and there is no “I” in “team”, and Leverage is a great team, and everybody is pretty excited to come to work every day.

**Lewis Howes:** Right, I know I’ve been to your office a bunch of times, and employees come up, show up at 5 am it seems like sometimes. Its like the boiler room in there, it's a lot of fun. But isn’t Tony working for you, or working there as well.

**Ben Sturner:** Yes, we earlier this year, was very honored to have Tony Ponturo invest and become our Chairman of Leverage Agency, this was quite a big accomplishment for us, for someone who we admire and respect, and is known in the industry and the godfather of sports. He worked at Anheiser-Busch as the head of Media Sponsorship, and sports entertainment for over 26 years. He recently left and became our chairman, and has done his own consulting and work. And he has been invaluable, he’s made it an amazing place, and its always great to hear his thoughts on where the industry is going, and how to work different deals, and to get his perspective on leagues, events and relationships. And it comes down again to relationships, and he has probably more than anyone else.

**Lewis Howes:** Right exactly. And just to, you know, this conversation is supposed to be about sponsorships and the general, just to talk about general success in the sports business, from my understanding of my relationship with you, and kind of seeing your results from afar, and the things that you’ve taken on, it seems like basically the key to your success has been: 1) having a great team underneath you, who are surrounding you, who work with you, who are as smart as you, smarter than you, or who can complement the things you aren’t as good at; 2) bringing on some potentially big shots like Tony who can help leverage the greater relationships that you don’t have the opportunities to get; 3) is an amazing hunger and passion and hustle at an early on age in your career with the company, and really just doing whatever it takes to make it succeed. It seems like those are some of the few common areas of the strategies that you’ve implemented that have helped you be successful.

**Ben Sturner:** Yeah, I think the last part is one of the most important parts. Every single person comes to work for Leverage has the hustle and hunger. You have to be hungry for your next sale. You’re only as good as your next sale. And you have to be able to really want it. And there has to be a way that, in your inner side, that separates our team from anybody else. We stay later, we work harder, but its really the hunger that shows. I think for people trying to get into sports sponsorship, you need to have that drive. You can’t be complacent, and you need to be ambitious, but also aggressive, in a polite and honorable way. I think that’s what will separate you from other people. And people can see it in your eyes, and you
can see it in your stomach too. You have to be a guy who is able to take it to the next level, not be afraid to make the next call, or to network with whoever you need to, to get done a deal.

**Lewis Howes:** Right, exactly. Let’s get into some sponsorship questions, and we’ll wrap up maybe with a bunch from your story, and about your hustle. Really quickly, what is, let’s talk about some big sponsorships, some small sponsorships, and all the questions in between. What is your strategy for securing sponsorships with large companies such as Coke or Subway, or Progressive Insurance, or Dodge, what’s some of the strategies for securing the big time sponsorship deals, the multi-million dollar sponsorship deals?

**Ben Sturner:** It all comes down to the same thing as a $2,000 sponsorship deal, as a $20 million sponsorship. It comes down to trust. The person on the other side needs to be able to trust you. He or she needs to be able to trust the product and the value that you’re giving. It needs to be backed up, the number you’re giving for sponsorship needs to be backed up with media analysis, which is objective, and basically the relationship. If a company gets into business with you, and the property you’re representing, they want to feel strongly that they’re going to have a great relationship, and they’re going to see their product grow, and see sales through their passion point and sponsorship. And so, it’s a combination of a lot of things, but at the end of the day, it’s about trust. You can do a deal with Coca-Cola, you can do a deal with Anheiser-Busch, or you can do a deal with a local or regional company, it’s all the same. There’s a little bit more of a complex deal, in title naming right sponsorships, as we just did a very big one with Nivea, a 5 year deal with AVP and new rights partner Nivea tour, AVP-Nivea Tour, and there is several layers around that. But at the end of the day, it comes back to the same common theme, which is trust. And that is the most important part in any sponsorship.

**Lewis Howes:** Sounds like with the bigger deals there might be some other major details you need to figure out. Once you establish the trust, then the details sort themselves out with the paperwork and the lawyers. What, I guess, for someone who is trying to break into finding a sponsor, whether it’s a small one or a big one, how do they build that trust with the potential sponsor?

**Ben Sturner:** You’ve got to research, research, research. Come up with an idea, something that you feel that breaks through the clutter, there’s so much clutter out there in the advertising space, you know, when you’re watching TV, when you’re watching a baseball game, NASCAR, you’re seeing a lot of different brands, so how do you differentiate your brand and your sponsorship from all the other brands that are out there? And how does this relate back to selling the product. Getting loyalty with the consumers? Doing something that can also get PR and media. You want to get people talking about the brand. Whether its people around the watercooler, or people on USA Today, the writers at USA Today, or the New York
Times, or Sports Illustrated. You want to be able to develop word of mouth media around the sponsorship as well.

Lewis Howes: And you’ve done a lot of non-traditional marketing tactics, such as head-tattoo advertising, and a lot of different things, so where do you get your inspiration for those ideas? If someone is looking for those types of ideas, how do they get that inspiration like you have?

Ben Sturmer: Well you have to really be creative, you have to think about what can you do that can get the press talking about your sponsorship, or about your activation tactic. We did some head advertising, tattoos on the forehead, a long time ago for Reebok for the Boston marathon. Terry Tate, the linebacker and Dunkin Donuts around the MCA tournament, and we created a platform for them with an online program too. So it’s about coming up with out of the box ideas, something that can be low cost and high impact, and that’s what marketers want. They want to feel like they’re spending a lot less than the impact they’re getting. They want to have that 4-1, 10-1, 20-1 return. And be creative and fun. It’s a lot to do, consumers love brands that have fun. And if you can do that and keep in mind something that relates back to the brand, it works.

Lewis Howes: If you’re trying to close a deal with a brand, a sponsorship deal with a brand, and there is an issue, and they are basically asking “how do you calculate sponsorship ROI, when some of the investment is goodwill, brand recognition, which is tough to measure?” How do you come back with an answer when people say, how are you going to measure some of these tactics?

Ben Sturmer: Well, there’s different ways. If you’re measuring a sponsorship, you can look at the media value, what kind of impression they get, what is the cost of a 30 sec ad, and how much exposure do you get? There are also intangibles, such as exclusivity of the sponsorship, as well as other benefits, such as hospitality, and signage, and TV features and integration into a TV show or event and then on-site execution, which should show a result in sales. So if you can put them all together into a return-on-investment analysis, to showcase that what you’re getting is the best thing you can do.

Lewis Howes: That’s great. So it seems like basically, how far will you go to make a brand feel comfortable and happy about the situation, until the sponsorship deal is made? Will you go above and beyond, or is it like here are the terms, and this is it? How do you deal with that relationship?

Ben Sturmer: Absolutely going to go above and beyond. You don’t want to just be here’s the terms and that’s it. You want to showcase that you have the knowledge about the brand. Do something as I said before that no one else has done. Becoming the first, the biggest, the best, you know something that can get people talking about the product and the sponsorship. You want to treat every sponsorship as very
special. Special to you and special to the brand, because that’s what it is. You want to differentiate
yourself and the sponsorship you’re working on.

**Lewis Howes:** Does it seem like its, in my opinion, I get a lot of people emailing and asking me, I
forward you tons of emails from people saying we’re trying to get a sponsor for this, we’re trying get a
sponsor on that. And its not easy getting one sponsor, let alone a few sponsors, so when you have the
opportunity to close one, then you really need to go above and beyond, is what it sounds like.

**Ben Sturner:** You also have to put a deadline. Because one of the problems with sponsorships is that
brands can sit there for a long time, and you have to be able to be patient, but realize what they’re fiscal
budget is, how much time it is in between when they make their decision and when you need to make the
decision. If you’re selling a golf property, and the event is in September, and hey its August 15th, you’re
going to need to know if they’re in or out, and you just have to put a deadline on it, or it can just wind up
in the valley of indecision. Either you got to move to the yes, or the no, or a lot of times it will just sit
there.

**Lewis Howes:** You just got to make a decision. And that’s a great marketing tactic in general, is just
scarcity. You have to create some form of time scarcity, or limited scarcity of opportunities, and that will
make people make a decision much quicker on whether they are in or out, and that’s going to allow you to
move on to the next sponsorship opportunity if they don’t go forward with that. That’s great stuff. What
about, lets just talk about, what in your opinion, what’s easier to close? A million dollar sponsorship, or a
$10,000 sponsorship?

**Ben Sturner:** Obviously the million dollar sponsorship, because it takes a lot more of the budget. Its
closer to close. $10,000 sponsorship is still tough, depending on what kind of brand you’re talking to,
but its all about the value. So if you have the value that exceeds the $10,000 sponsorship, its easy to
close, just like anything else. But I’m not gonna lie and say its easy to close a $1 million sponsorship,
because you’re taking a huge amount of budget of anyone’s brand, and you need a lot more approval,
there’s brands that can approve up to $500,000, and there are brands that will blow $1 million very easily,
without going to the next level of approval. So, it’s a bit of a toss-up, but it’s the same thing that’s going
back to trust, and it goes back to value. And if you can provide a value that far exceeds the $1 million
sponsorship, then its worth it. And sometimes when you’re dealing with a $1 million sponsorship, the
value is so much there that its just easy, because you have so much inventory, and such great value that its
well worth it if you get the right brand, the right time, the right place. It’s a lot to do with timing.
Lewis Howes: Ok, let's manage people’s expectations really quick. Give me an answer, if you just say you’re reaching out to the first time company, you don’t have a relationship with them yet. You’re just reaching out to a new brand, to pitch them an opportunity for sponsorship. Whether it’s a $10,000 sponsorship, or up to $1 million sponsorship, it doesn’t matter the price. Give me, in your opinion, the average time rate, from when the potential close might happen, or how long may it take? Will it take 3 months, 6 months, 12 months? Can you give me some kind of timeframe on average?

Ben Sturner: I can’t give you a timeframe, because there’s been deals in which we close in 10 minutes, right before something happens on the first email. There’s been deals that take 6, 7, 8, 10 months. And then a lot of romancing the sponsor and crying and listening, and going to different meetings around the country where the sponsor is, and tracking them down, and establishing rapport, not only with the sponsor and the marketing department, but with the secretary, and everyone around the person. It takes time, and depending on what you’re selling, and the cycle around it, it will take time. Today I was on the phone with an automotive company, and we’re talking about a sponsorship for 2011, and it won’t start until April of next year. But you know we’re talking about activation ideas, and getting into the planning cycle, and being a part of it. But if you don’t do that now, you’re going to miss the boat.

Lewis Howes: Exactly. So you’ve got to put your time in early, and sometimes it may take up to a year until you get that sponsorship deal you want. So you’ve got to be patient is what you’re saying. Patience is a virtue. Let’s talk really quick about professional athlete brands. You work with some of the top athletes. You’ve got Evander Holyfield that you work with, let’s talk about Tiger Woods, he’s been in the news lately. How can a company like yourself, let’s say you’re repping Tiger Woods, and you’re helping him with his sponsorships. A lot of the sponsorships dropped off, short term, long term, how will his sponsorship value, I guess will it continue to fall out, or will more hop back on? What does this do for his brand? How would you help his brand image, and cultivate those sponsorships to come back on?

Ben Sturner: It’s all timing, because someone like Tiger, who’s made hundreds of millions of dollars off the golf course is not looking for a $1 million or $2 million sponsorship. Things like this take time. Michael Phelps had an issue, and then that took a little bit of time, and now he’s back in sponsorship mode. It’s happened to Kobe Bryant and others. It takes a little bit of time, he needs to do what he can to get back his personal life, I would suggest not worrying about the off-court focus. And then once his personal life is under control, get on the golf course and win. And nobody likes, America loves, corporate America loves winners. And the performance brands like Nike have not dropped him yet. EA Sports, he’s still working with them. I think it will take a little bit of time, and he has a brand that everyone knows, but right now its tarnished, and that takes time like anything. Any kind of crisis takes time.
Lewis Howes: Going on to another topic, let’s talk about naming rights. A naming rights deal, what are some general or important considerations for both sponsorship and property owner?

Ben Sturner: Well it has to be a deal that makes sense, especially now. In this day and age, there hasn’t been that many long term deals in 20+ years, so there has to be consideration towards the economy, and when it’s the right time for brands to get on board, and the right type of brand, a brand that’s not volatile, you’ve seen airlines and financials have gone up and down over the past couple years. A company that can stay around and wants to get involved in a new market is a good fit for naming rights, and there is a lot of interest in issues that go along with naming rights, in terms of hospitality, in terms of sponsorship within the arena, exclusivity, and it depends what market you’re in too. The Meadowlands NY markets a lot more than the naming rights in Portland, Oregon. It depends what the market is, the timing, and the right brand fit. The fit with the team, and also importantly, in the community. If it’s looking for naming rights, there’s two things. If the brand wants to get involved to make a big splash in that area, or it’s a brand that wants to support the local area, they will go and make their headquarters there. And that’s often the case. Look at Gillette Stadium in Boston.

Lewis Howes: Yeah, exactly. I want to ask a couple more questions about your career success, answers and questions around that. But is there one last thing about sponsorships that you think is important for people to know, whether small sponsorships, large sponsorships, and everything in between?

Ben Sturner: Yeah, there’s a lot that gets done between your first call and the signed contract. It’s creating a presentation, its having a video, its showcases your property, its meetings, its follow ups. Follow ups are so crucial in this, its keeping the sponsor engaged, and its getting the right price and the right budget that can fit and make sense.

Lewis Howes: Let me ask you a couple more questions, then we’ll wrap things up. Let’s talk about, I guess I want to know, what’s the one thing in your career in the sports sponsorship industry that you wish you would have started sooner? Is there one thing that you know now that you wish you would have done sooner?

Ben Sturner: I think there’s a lot of things that I could have learned. I think I would have surrounded myself with good legal counsel, that’s something I wish I had earlier on, and also, a good CFO. And the finances of your business, there’s a lot of things you know, taxes, and payroll, and accounting, and office space, and hiring, and a lot of office administration, where when you’re an entrepreneur you learn on the go. You adjust and things might not work out, but you’re able to put it back into place. I think getting that experience has been very helpful, and I’ve been very fortunate to have a different amount of
marketing experience from public relations, to media, to television, to sponsorships. You know, that’s important.

**Lewis Howes:** I kind of get the same, as an entrepreneur, I’m going through the same type, I guess, struggles and opportunities. Like bring on new employees, setting up your business, the accounting side of things, the finances, managing the money, it’s a whole other game that they don’t actually teach you in school. No one else really teaches you, you just have to make the mistakes and go along with it. I definitely agree that getting good legal advice and getting a good accountant early on is the best way to go for sure. Couple more questions. What skill do you personally possess that you would consider to be the most valuable asset or skill to your career success?

**Ben Sturner:** I think I’d try to look at the glass half full, versus the glass as half empty. And if you live your life like that, you look at the positives, when you can have a lot of people around you talking negatively and complaining. And every single day, I come into my office, as excited as I could be, because I remember the time when I was in my apartment with barely any money, and struggling and meeting at Starbucks, and now I’ve got a huge conference room on 5th Avenue, and now I’ve got a great office and great people around me. So I think I’m very loyal and I have a determination and perseverance that other people maybe don’t have. And I like to be as positive as possible, and I think that’s been very helpful for me.

**Lewis Howes:** Ok last question. What steps can someone looking to work with sponsorships take to get involved in that type of field or industry?

**Ben Sturner:** I think its very important to have internships, and try different types of industry, whether its sponsorships or media relations, or media buying, or advertising, creative. And then figure out what you want to do, whether its sponsorships or other parts of the business. You may like representation, or the creative side. There’s so much to try, and the best time to try it is when you’re young and you have the ability to do an internship. Half of, there’s probably about 12 people who work at Leverage who have been hired as interns. I don’t hire people out of college a couple years out, they have to go through an internship process, because you have to be able to know and do well. Its not easy to get an internship with us, and if they do a great, incredible job, and we don’t want to lose them. The most important step you can do is don’t be afraid to learn, and to get your hands dirty, and roll up your sleeves, and do an internship. And ask what can I do to help? And be a sponge and learn as much as you can.
**Lewis Howes:** You know, I appreciate you coming on. I’m going to give you one last final word here in a second. But for everyone listening, Ben Sturner really built an empire in less than five years. Really, in less than three years he was a major player, and works with the top, the most recognized athletes in the world, the most recognized brands in the world, the most recognized companies in the world, and some of the biggest celebrities and individuals and CEOs, and its really a testament to his attitude, his vision, his passion, and his work ethic. Its really a matter of putting all the pieces together and doing this. Whether you’re talking about trying to get a sponsorship, or you’re just talking about trying to advance your career in the sports business, or just build a business in general, or get a job, if you guys can just implement the strategies and the mindset that Ben has implemented, he built this in less than 5 years, a mega multi-million dollar empire, and anyone else can do it if they put those pieces together. So I guess, what’s your final thoughts on sponsorships, or I guess, success in the sports industry, what would you have to say Ben?

**Ben Sturner:** I think in terms of sponsorships, you should look into all the different properties that are out there. From the LPGA to the National Lacrosse League to AVP Beach Volleyball, to the NBA, to the NFL, major league Baseball, and just study. Study when you’re watching TV, look at the signage, look at why they’re sponsoring the team, the league, whatever they’re sponsoring. Become an expert in you’re field. And read and get to know people and network, like Lewis. Become a sports networker, and I think that’s the most important to be successful, and to be the kind of person you want to be, and follow your passion, and most importantly be humble and remember your beginnings, which I think is so important. Everybody who gave me a chance, I always come back and thank and remember. Send a thank you letter, a real thank you letter, and multiple ones each day to people, and they appreciate it. So if you can stay humble and remember you’re beginnings, and follow your dreams, and really visualize success. Goal setting is the most important thing, and without goal setting, you’re not going to get anywhere, because you must identify quantitative results, and performance results, and how you’re going to get there, and the steps to make it to success. And don’t let anybody get in your way or say no to you, in a way that won’t get to what you want to achieve. So I appreciate Lewis and this kind of forum to give other people a chance to hear from people in the industry. And that’s the most important.

**Lewis Howes:** I appreciate it Ben, and this wraps up our Sports Sponsorships Session, and the SCA, and thanks again for coming on Ben. And I’ll have links for everyone to connect to Ben and learn more about Leverage Agency. Thanks a lot.

**Ben Sturner:** I appreciate it Lewis, and anytime anybody can email me at Ben@leverageagency.com.