



PRODUCTIONS

Show Choir Products and News



CLOSING THE FUNDING GAP

**PLAN THE
TRIP, SAVE THE
SEASON**

WHY SMART TRAVEL
PLANNING IS THE
SECRET WEAPON OF
SUCCESSFUL SHOW
CHOIR PROGRAMS

**MEASURE TWICE,
LOAD ONCE**

LESSONS LEARNED
IN SHOW CHOIR SET
DESIGN



**HOW CORPORATE
SPONSORSHIPS CAN
TURN YOUR SHOW CHOIR
INTO THE HOTTEST
PROPERTY IN TOWN**

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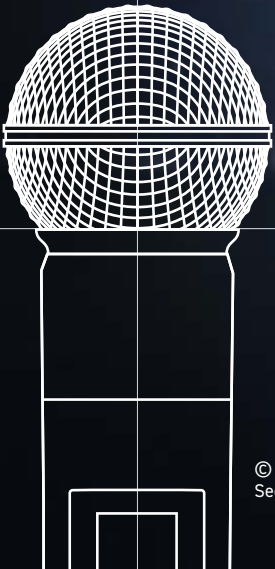
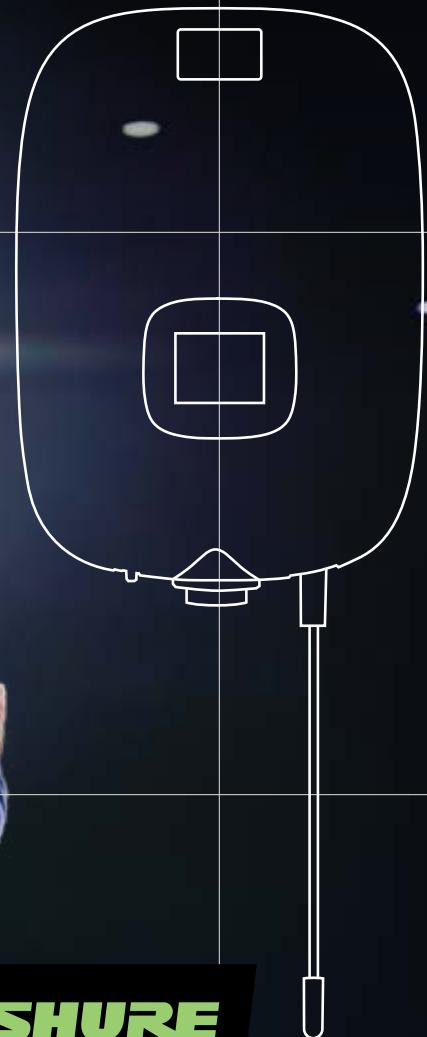
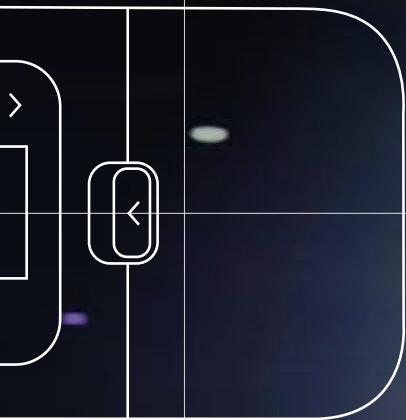
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NEWSLETTER

With over 220 members, the National Association for Show Choir (NASC) has set an audacious goal: to unite the show choir community in identifying common objectives, finding solutions to shared challenges, and championing the art of show choir. We recently celebrated our first anniversary on Facebook.

The NASC held its inaugural, virtual meeting last September with approximately 30 members in attendance. While the number of attendees has dropped at subsequent meetings, they are filled with intriguing conversations and connected members from coast to coast.

Why does it matter? Since 2015, show choir programs in the United States have significantly declined by over 800. Music educators are quick to blame the pandemic for the decline, but blaming ourselves for becoming insular would be more appropriate. In July, I had the opportunity to collaborate with some of the best directors, choreographers, arrangers, and costume designers in the show choir world at Showchoir Camps of America. The week's experiences were incredible, but everyone left camp and returned to their respective cubicles once it was over.

Show choir pockets have become more common throughout the U.S., which makes it difficult for show choir programs to attend and host competitions. Show choir will flourish when we start advocating, educating, and inspiring current and future music educators outside our program through consistent collaboration. In most cases, show choir directors are the only choral music educators at their school, limiting opportunities to collaborate with someone who understands what we do. NASC provides a safe platform for monthly collaboration among music educators throughout the United States.

The short-term goal for NASC is to identify a common meeting time for monthly meetings and bring in compelling guest speakers who will appeal to a large audience. A longer-term goal is to have NASC representatives from each state advocate for show choir at state and regional music educator conferences.

This is essential to reinvigorating the show choir community in schools. Too often, show choir is considered taboo. NASC wants to shatter the stigma surrounding show choirs by continuing to educate vocal associations, music educators, and administrations how these dynamic programs not only foster students' creativity, teamwork, and self-confidence but also ignite a sense of community spirit, drawing audiences together to celebrate the arts and support young talent.

The National Association for Show Choirs' mission is to advocate, educate, and inspire current and future music educators to progress show choir throughout the United States.



8 CLOSING THE FUNDING GAP: HOW CORPORATE SPONSORSHIPS CAN TURN YOUR SHOW CHOIR INTO THE HOTTEST PROPERTY IN TOWN

Your show choir may be sitting on one of the most valuable fundraising opportunities in town. Corporate sponsorships can close the funding gap, build community partnerships, and give local businesses a reason to invest in your students.

18 PLAN THE TRIP, SAVE THE SEASON: WHY SMART TRAVEL PLANNING IS THE SECRET WEAPON OF SUCCESSFUL SHOW CHOIR PROGRAMS

Travel can make or break a show choir season, but success rarely comes down to budget alone. The strongest programs plan early, budget wisely, communicate clearly, and solve problems before they happen. From buses and hotels to fundraising and parent concerns, smart travel planning reduces stress and creates the unforgettable experiences students remember for years.



26 MEASURE TWICE, LOAD ONCE: LESSONS LEARNED IN SHOW CHOIR SET DESIGN

A beautiful show choir set can inspire students, impress parents, and bring a show concept to life. But if it cannot fit in the trailer, move through competition hallways, set up quickly, and survive weekend after weekend, the design is not finished. This article explores the real-world side of show choir set design: portability, reuse, budgeting, tech crew input, competition logistics, and the unforgettable lessons learned when scenery meets reality at 6 a.m.

editor's letter

There is a funny thing about summer in the world of Show Choir. To everyone else, summer means slowing down, sleeping in, sitting by the pool, taking vacations, and perhaps forgetting what day of the week it is. For Show Choir directors, choreographers, students, and boosters... summer means "Great! We have three months to create an entirely new masterpiece before competition season arrives!"

No pressure, right?

While the school hallways may be quiet, rehearsal spaces, dance studios, music rooms, and summer camps across the country are buzzing with creativity. This is the season where ideas are born. It is where a director hears that perfect song and immediately thinks, "That is the opening number!" It is where a choreographer dreams up a moment that will bring an audience to its feet. It is where students attend camps and clinics, make lifelong friendships, develop their skills, and return home inspired and ready to perform at a new level.

Summer camps have become one of the most important ingredients in the success of many programs. They are places where performers gain confidence, discover new techniques, and reconnect with the reason they fell in love with Show Choir in the first place. There is something special about spending a week surrounded by people who understand why you suddenly break into harmony in the middle of a lunch line or why you spend 15 minutes debating the perfect jazz hand.

As another competition season begins to take shape, we know the months ahead will bring long rehearsals, costume decisions, music edits, set construction, fundraising efforts, travel planning, and yes, perhaps a few moments where someone says, "Whose idea was it to put a key change right after that dance break?"

The answer is usually... everyone's.

But that is also the magic of Show Choir. It is the collaboration between directors, students, parents, designers, technicians, and volunteers that transforms a simple idea into a performance that can move an audience and create memories that last a lifetime.

Here at *Productions* magazine, we love hearing your stories. Tell us about your summer camps, your new show themes, your favorite rehearsal moments, and even the funny behind-the-scenes stories that happen along the journey. The Show Choir community is built on sharing ideas, celebrating successes, and learning from one another.

As we turn the page toward another exciting season, I want to personally thank our growing family of readers, contributors, and supporters. Your passion, creativity, and dedication are what make this community so extraordinary. Thank you for allowing *Productions* magazine to be a small part of your remarkable journey and for letting us share in the wonderful creative stories that continue to inspire us all.

Here's to a summer filled with imagination, music, laughter, and the first steps toward your next standing ovation.

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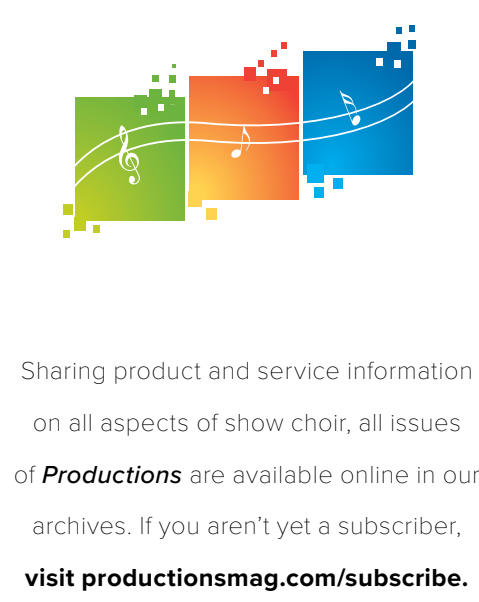


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THE FREE SHOW CHOIR MAGAZINE

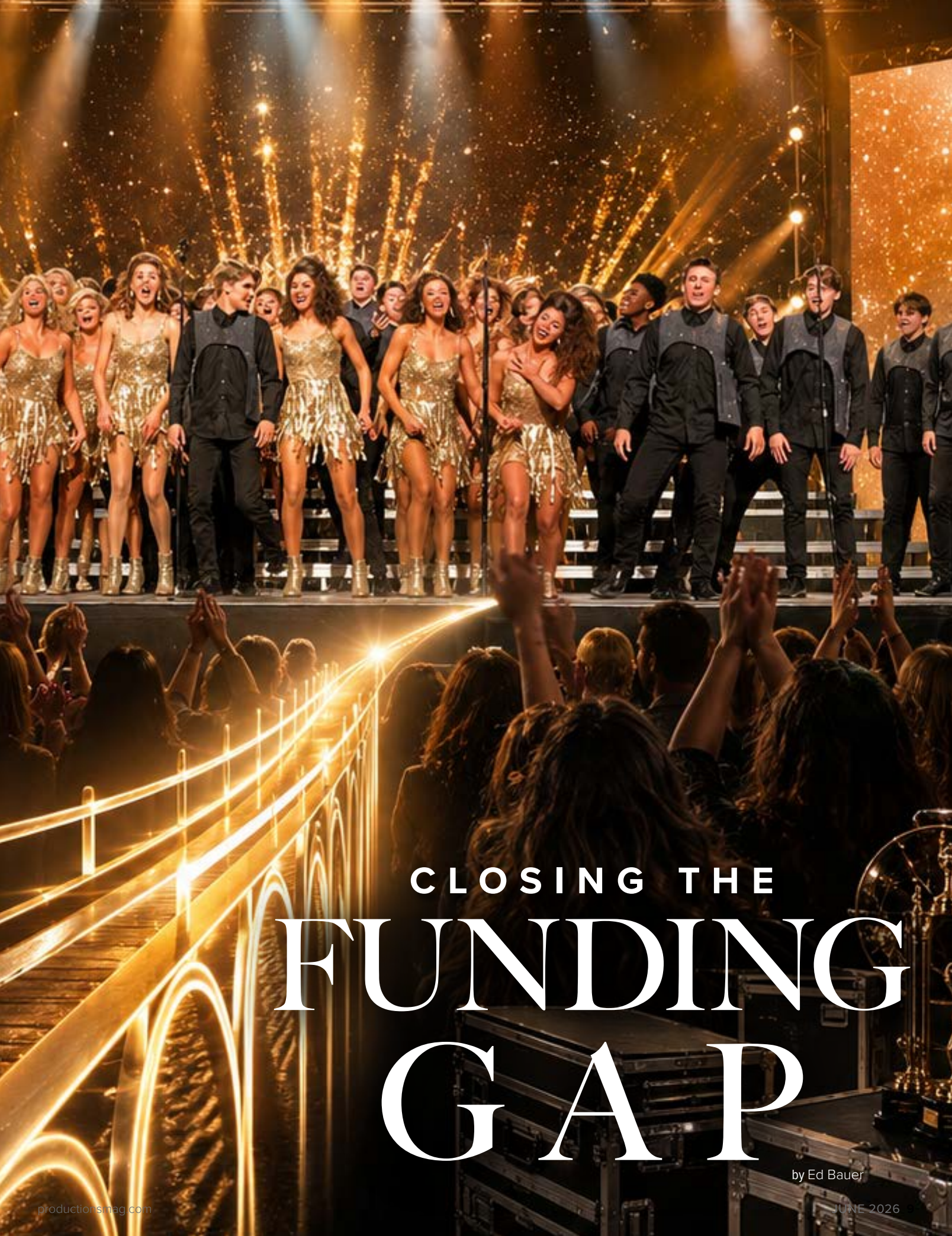
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YOUR COMPLETE ONLINE RESOURCE FOR DIRECTORS & BOOSTERS.





CLOSING THE
FUNDING
GAP

by Ed Bauer



Every show choir director knows the feeling.

You have a brilliant show concept. The costumes are spectacular. The choreography is sharp. The students are working harder than ever. Then someone opens the budget spreadsheet and suddenly everyone develops a nervous twitch.

Transportation costs have increased. Hotel prices have climbed. Costume expenses seem to multiply overnight. Sound equipment isn't getting any younger. And let's not even discuss the cost of rhinestones.

For many programs, the fundraising conversation usually revolves around selling something. Cookie dough. Candles. Discount cards. Popcorn. More popcorn.

While traditional fundraisers

certainly have their place, there is another source of revenue that many show choir programs have barely tapped: corporate and local business sponsorships.

The truth is that businesses spend money every year trying to get their names in front of local families. Show choir programs happen to have exactly what businesses want—engaged audiences, community goodwill, and hundreds of loyal supporters who attend events throughout the year.

In other words, your show choir may be more valuable to sponsors than you realize.

The Great Sponsorship Myth

Many boosters and directors avoid sponsorships because they believe three things:

1. Businesses don't have money.
2. Nobody wants to meet with them.

3. Someone else is more qualified to ask.

- Announcer mentions
- Website visibility
- Community goodwill

Fortunately, all three assumptions are usually wrong.

Businesses allocate marketing budgets every year. They routinely sponsor youth sports, charity events, festivals, golf tournaments, and community organizations.

The real question isn't whether businesses sponsor local causes.

The question is: Why aren't they sponsoring your show choir?

If your students perform for thousands of audience members throughout a season, host competitions, maintain active social media accounts, and engage families across the community, you have something worth sponsoring.

The challenge isn't finding money. It's making the connection.

Stop Asking for Donations

Here's the first sponsorship hack that changes everything:

Don't ask for a donation.

Ask for a partnership.

Those two words may sound similar, but psychologically they are worlds apart.

A donation sounds like charity.

A partnership sounds like business.

Most companies prefer partnerships because they receive something in return:

- Logo placement
- Program advertising
- Social media recognition
- Event signage

Every booster organization contains a hidden sponsorship goldmine.

When approaching a business, think like a marketer, not a fundraiser.

Instead of saying:

"Would you be willing to donate to our show choir?"

Try:

"We have several sponsorship opportunities that connect your business with thousands of local families throughout the season."

One sounds like an expense.

The other sounds like an opportunity.

The Secret Weapon Sitting in Your Booster Club

Every booster organization contains a hidden sponsorship goldmine.

Parents.

Take a moment and think about your current booster membership.



Someone owns a construction company.

Someone manages a bank branch.

Someone works in healthcare.

Someone sells insurance.

Someone manages a manufacturing facility.

Someone serves on a chamber of commerce board.

Yet many sponsorship efforts begin with cold calls to complete strangers.

Why?

Start with the people already sitting in the booster meeting.

Create a simple exercise.

Ask every family to list:

- Their employer
- Businesses they own
- Professional organizations they belong to
- Business relationships they have

You will be amazed how quickly a sponsorship prospect list develops.

The warmest lead is almost always someone who already knows your program.

Getting Past the Fear Factor

Let's address the giant elephant wearing sequins in the room.

Fear.

Most people are not afraid of sponsorships.

They are afraid of rejection.

The thought process goes something like this:

"What if they say no?"

Here's a liberating reality:

They might.

And that's perfectly fine.

Professional salespeople hear "no" every day.

Professional fundraisers hear "no" every day.

Successful sponsorship programs are built on hearing lots of "no's" before hearing enough "yeses."

One director told me they secured over \$25,000 in sponsorships after contacting nearly 80 businesses.

That means many businesses declined.

The success wasn't avoiding rejection.

The success was surviving it.

A useful mindset shift is this:

You are not asking for yourself.

You are advocating for students.

Most people will willingly do difficult things when it's for kids.

When you're nervous, remember that you're not selling vacuum cleaners.

You're creating opportunities for young performers.

That's a much easier conversation to have.

How to Get in Front of the Decision Maker

Here's where many sponsorship

efforts die.

Someone walks into a business and asks the first person they see.

The receptionist smiles politely. The information gets placed in a drawer.

The sponsorship request disappears forever.

Instead, focus on finding the actual decision maker.

This might be:

- Owner
- General manager
- Marketing director
- Community relations manager
- Branch manager

Here's a surprisingly effective script:

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program. Who handles community sponsorships and marketing partnerships for your organization?"

Simple.

Direct.

Professional.

Most people will gladly point you in the right direction.

Once you identify the correct contact, request a brief meeting.

Not an hour.

Not thirty minutes.

Fifteen minutes.

Busy professionals are much more likely to agree to a short meeting.

The Coffee Shop Strategy

One of the most effective sponsorship hacks is what I call the Coffee Shop Strategy.

Instead of presenting a sponsorship package immediately, invite the business

leader to coffee.

The purpose isn't to ask for money.

The purpose is to build a relationship.

People support people they know.

- During the conversation:
- Learn about their business
- Ask about their goals
- Discuss community involvement
- Share the impact of the program

By the end of the meeting, the sponsorship discussion feels natural rather than transactional.

Relationships create sponsors.

Brochures alone rarely do.

Create Sponsorship Levels That Make Sense

Many programs accidentally make sponsorship decisions harder than necessary.

A sponsorship menu should be simple.

For example:

Bronze Sponsor – \$250

- Program recognition
- Website listing

Silver Sponsor – \$500

- Bronze benefits
- Event signage

Gold Sponsor – \$1,000

- Silver benefits
- Social media promotion
- Announcer recognition

Platinum Sponsor – \$2,500+

- Premium visibility
- Event partnership opportunities
- Featured recognition

The goal is to eliminate confusion.

People often choose from options more easily than they respond to open-ended requests.

Think Beyond Money

One of the biggest sponsorship mistakes is focusing only on cash.

In-kind sponsorships can dramatically reduce expenses.

Examples include:

- Printing services
- Transportation discounts
- Food donations
- Hotel partnerships
- Construction materials
- Equipment loans
- Marketing support

Every dollar you don't spend is effectively a dollar raised.

A restaurant providing meals for a competition weekend can be just as valuable as a financial sponsor.

Sometimes more valuable.

Turn Competitions Into Sponsorship Magnets

If your organization hosts a competition, congratulations.

You are sitting on one of the strongest sponsorship opportunities available.

Sponsors love events.

Events create visibility.

A local company may have little interest in funding a bus trip.

They may be very interested in sponsoring an event attended by thousands of people.

Think creatively:

- Hospitality Room Sponsor
- Best Vocals Award Sponsor
- People's Choice Award Sponsor
- Warm-Up Room Sponsor
- Livestream Sponsor
- Judges' Lounge Sponsor

Suddenly sponsorship becomes tangible and visible.



Businesses understand exactly what they are supporting.

The Follow-Up Superpower

Here's a secret that separates successful sponsorship programs from unsuccessful ones.

Follow-up.

Most people quit after one contact.

Successful sponsorship teams follow up professionally and consistently.

A possible schedule:

- Initial email
- Follow-up call one week later
- Personal visit if appropriate
- Thank-you message regardless of outcome

Persistence often wins.

Not because businesses enjoy being pressured.

Because people are busy.

Many sponsorships are secured simply because someone remembered to follow up.

Become Ridiculously Good at Saying Thank You

This may be the most important section of the article.

When someone sponsors your program, your job is not finished.

It's just beginning.

The easiest sponsorship to secure is often the sponsor you already have.

Make sponsors feel appreciated.



Ideas include:

- Student thank-you videos
- Handwritten notes
- Social media spotlights
- Sponsor appreciation banners
- Recognition at performances
- Year-end reports showing impact

Imagine receiving a handwritten note from a student explaining how a sponsorship helped them participate in show choir.

That's powerful.

That's memorable.

That's how long-term sponsorship relationships are built.

The Community Wants to Help

Many directors and boosters assume businesses view sponsorship requests as interruptions.

The reality is often the opposite.

Business owners live in your community.

Their children attend local schools.

They attend performances.

They want thriving arts programs.

They want positive opportunities for students.

Sometimes they simply need to be asked.

The greatest risk isn't hearing "no."

The greatest risk is never asking at all.

Final Curtain

Every show choir program faces financial challenges.

Travel costs rise.

Production expectations grow.

Budgets tighten.

Yet communities are filled with businesses looking for meaningful ways to engage with local families and support worthwhile causes.

The opportunity exists.

The audience exists.

The potential sponsors exist.

The question is whether your program will step into the spotlight and claim its share.

So gather your booster leaders.

Build your prospect list.

Schedule the meetings.

Tell your story.

And remember: if your students can perform a four-minute show with costume changes, choreography, and live vocals in front of a packed audience, surely the adults can survive a 15-minute sponsorship meeting.

After all, compared to singing and dancing under bright lights, asking for sponsorships is practically easy.

Almost.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Ed Bauer has been in publishing for over twenty years. He was introduced to Show Choir by his daughter and he is forever grateful to her for this wonderful gift.



PLAN THE TRIP, SAVE THE SEASON

WHY SMART TRAVEL PLANNING IS THE
SECRET WEAPON OF SUCCESSFUL SHOW CHOIR
PROGRAMS

by Ed Bauer





PHOTO COURTESY CHARLES RODRIGUEZ OF INSYNC



PHOTO COURTESY CHARLES RODRIGUEZ OF INSYNC

There are few moments in a show choir season more exciting than announcing the competition schedule.

The room erupts.

Students immediately begin imagining trophies, hotel stays, bus rides, and late-night pizza runs.

Parents start calculating how many weekends they will spend in gymnasiums.

Booster presidents quietly begin wondering if it is too late to take up a less stressful hobby.



PHOTO COURTESY CHARLES RODRIGUEZ OF INSYN

And directors stare at a spreadsheet that looks suspiciously like the federal budget.

Travel has become one of the largest expenses facing show choir programs today. Between transportation, lodging, meals, registration fees, and the occasional emergency trip to a pharmacy because someone forgot deodorant, costs can escalate quickly.

Yet the programs that travel successfully year after year are not necessarily the wealthiest.

They are simply the best planners.

The secret to successful travel isn't finding money at the last minute.

It's building a plan long before the first bus leaves the parking lot.

The Earlier You Plan, The Cheaper It Gets

Every experienced director learns the same lesson eventually:

Travel rewards the early bird.

Unfortunately, many programs begin serious planning approximately three days after they should have started.

The moment a competition schedule begins taking shape, travel planning should begin as well.

Consider the major expenses involved in even a regional competition:

- Entry fees
- Charter buses
- Driver lodging
- Fuel surcharges
- Hotel rooms
- Meals
- Emergency expenses
- Student scholarships

Now multiply those expenses across an entire season.

Suddenly, "We'll figure it out later" becomes a terrifying strategy.

One of the smartest moves a booster organization can make is creating a preliminary travel budget before the season even starts.

Estimate high rather than low.

Nobody has ever complained that a trip came in under budget.

Understanding the True Cost of Local Competitions

Many directors underestimate local competition expenses because the event appears close to home.

A competition only 90 minutes away can still generate significant costs.

Ask yourself:

Will students need charter buses?

Will meals be provided?

Will equipment require a separate truck?

Will the group need additional rehearsal time?

Will parent volunteers be needed?

A "cheap" competition often becomes much more expensive when hidden expenses appear.

A useful budgeting exercise is calculating the per-student cost for every event.

This creates a realistic picture of what participation truly costs and helps boosters prioritize spending.

Sometimes the competition with

the lowest entry fee ends up being the most expensive trip.

Regional Competitions: The Middle Ground

Regional travel introduces another layer of complexity.

Now you're likely adding hotels.

For many programs, this is where costs begin accelerating faster than choreography changes.

A few hotel-planning hacks can save thousands:

The moment a competition schedule begins taking shape, travel planning should begin as well.

Book Earlier Than Feels Necessary

Hotels reward groups that commit early.

Waiting often means fewer room choices and higher rates.

Negotiate Group Blocks

Many hotels offer complimentary rooms or discounts after a certain number of rooms are booked.

Ask.

The worst response you'll receive is "no."



Compare More Than Price

The cheapest hotel is not always the cheapest option.

Consider:

- Distance from venue
- Parking costs
- Breakfast availability
- Security
- Bus access

A hotel twenty dollars cheaper per room can become much more expensive if buses spend hours shuttling students across town.

The National Competition Dream

At some point, every show choir program starts discussing a national-level trip.

The conversation usually sounds something like this:

Student: "We should compete nationally."

Director: "That sounds exciting."

Booster Treasurer: "I need to sit down."

National competitions create unforgettable experiences, but they require a completely different level of preparation.

These trips may include:

- Airfare
- Multi-night lodging
- Equipment transportation
- Ground transportation

- Additional meals
- Attraction tickets
- Insurance considerations
- Contingency funds

The biggest mistake programs make is treating a national trip like a larger version of a regional trip.

It isn't.

It's an entirely different project.

Many successful programs begin fundraising for national travel eighteen to twenty-four months in advance.

That timeline isn't excessive.

It's responsible.

The "Trip Fund" Strategy

One of the smartest financial moves a booster organization can make is establishing a dedicated travel reserve fund.

Think of it as a travel savings account.

Instead of scrambling every season, the organization gradually builds reserves.

Benefits include:

- Better cash flow
- Less fundraising pressure
- Greater flexibility
- Reduced family stress

Programs with healthy reserves can often secure travel opportunities that would otherwise be impossible.

The goal isn't simply paying for this year's trip.

The goal is creating long-term stability.

Transportation: The Part Everyone Forgets Until It's Too Late

Nothing creates panic faster than transportation logistics.

Well, except maybe losing costumes.

Transportation should be secured earlier than most directors think necessary.

Bus companies are experiencing increased demand nationwide.

Competition weekends often overlap with:

- Athletic events
- School field trips
- Tourism seasons
- Corporate travel

The earlier transportation is secured, the better.

Transportation Planning Hacks Request Quotes from Multiple Providers

Rates vary significantly.

A little comparison shopping can save thousands.

Reserve Before Final Numbers Are Available

Most companies can adjust passenger counts later.

What they can't do is create buses that have already been booked by someone else.

Build Extra Capacity

Every director has experienced the mysterious growth of equipment.

The props become larger.

The costumes become bulkier.

The sound equipment multiplies overnight.

Leave room.

Future you will be grateful.

Overcoming School Administration Concerns

Let's address another reality.

Not every administrator gets excited when a show choir proposes traveling hundreds of miles with teenagers.

Administrators typically worry about three things:

- Safety
- Academic impact
- Financial risk

The good news?

These concerns are reasonable.

The better news?

They can be addressed.

Present Solutions, Not Problems

Administrators appreciate preparation.

When presenting travel plans, include:

- Detailed itineraries
- Safety procedures

- Chaperone ratios
- Emergency contacts
- Academic plans
- Budget projections

The more questions you answer before they ask them, the more confidence you create.

Demonstrate Educational Value

Travel is not simply recreation.

Show choir travel develops:

- Leadership
- Teamwork
- Responsibility
- Cultural awareness
- Performance skills

When framed appropriately, travel becomes an extension of the educational experience.

Show Financial Responsibility

Administrators become much more comfortable when they see:

- Fundraising plans
- Booster support
- Sponsorship commitments
- Budget contingencies

Confidence grows when financial surprises decrease.

Addressing Parent Concerns Before They Become Problems

Parents often have concerns they may not voice immediately.

Successful programs address those concerns proactively.

Concern #1: Cost

Families need information early.

The sooner projected costs are available, the more time parents have to plan.

Avoid surprises.

Parents dislike surprise expenses almost as much as directors dislike broken microphones.

Concern #2: Safety

Clearly communicate:

- Hotel supervision
- Chaperone procedures
- Curfews
- Transportation plans
- Emergency protocols

Confidence increases when details are transparent.

Concern #3: Missed School

Provide clear academic expectations.

Many parents support travel when they see accountability measures in place.

Concern #4: Value

Parents want to know what students gain from the experience.

Share stories.

Share photos.

Share testimonials.

Show the educational and personal growth that results from travel.

Fundraising Before You Need the Money

The best fundraising strategy is surprisingly simple:

Start earlier.

Many programs begin fundraising after expenses have already appeared.

This creates stress for everyone involved.

Instead, create a year-round fundraising calendar.

Potential opportunities include:

- Sponsorship campaigns
- Community performances
- Alumni support programs
- Special events
- Online giving campaigns
- Merchandise sales

When fundraising becomes consistent rather than reactive, financial pressure decreases dramatically.

The Magic of Incremental Payments

One national trip costing \$1,500 sounds overwhelming.

Twelve monthly payments of \$125 sounds manageable.

Breaking expenses into smaller installments reduces anxiety and increases participation.

Families appreciate predictability.

Booster organizations appreciate improved cash flow.

Everyone wins.

Why Reward Trips Matter More Than You Think

At first glance, reward performance trips may seem like luxury items.

They are not.

They are investments.

Whether it's performing at a major venue, participating in a festival, or taking a showcase trip after a successful season, reward travel creates powerful benefits.

Students remember these experiences for years.

Sometimes decades.

Ask alumni about their favorite show choir memories.

Few immediately mention a rehearsal.

Many immediately mention a trip.

The bus ride.

The hotel experience.

The performance destination.

The friendships.

The shared adventure.

Those memories become part of the program's culture.

The Recruiting Power of Travel

Travel can also become one of the strongest recruiting tools available.

Prospective students want experiences.

Parents want opportunities.

A vibrant travel program demonstrates both.

When younger students see older performers traveling, competing, and representing the school in exciting venues, participation becomes aspirational.

The program gains momentum.

Enrollment grows.

Community support increases.

The cycle becomes self-sustaining.

A well-planned reward trip isn't merely an expense.

It's a marketing tool.

It's a retention tool.

It's a recruiting tool.

And perhaps most importantly, it's a morale tool.

Final Destination

Every successful show choir trip begins long before anyone boards a bus or steps onto an airplane.

It starts with planning.

It starts with budgeting.

It starts with anticipating challenges before they become crises.



The directors and boosters who master travel planning understand a simple truth: logistics may not be glamorous, but they make the glamorous moments possible.

The standing ovation.

The championship announcement.

The unforgettable performance.

The memories students carry long after graduation.

Those moments don't happen by

accident.

They happen because someone booked the buses early, secured the hotel block, answered parent concerns, built the budget, and raised the funds months before they were needed.

Travel planning may never earn a trophy.


But it often determines whether your students get the chance to chase one.

And that's a journey worth planning.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Ed Bauer has been in publishing for over twenty years. He was introduced to Show Choir by his daughter and he is forever grateful to her for this wonderful gift.



PHOTO COURTESY VESTAVIA HILLS HIGH SCHOOL



MEASURE TWICE, LOAD ONCE

LESSONS LEARNED IN SHOW CHOIR SET DESIGN

By Ed Bauer

There are two moments every show choir director experiences when it comes to set design.

The first is when the concept is unveiled.

Everyone gathers around the design sketches. The excitement is contagious. Students are amazed. Choreographers are inspired. Parents are impressed. The booster president nervously asks, "How much is this going to cost?"

The second moment occurs at 5:15 a.m. on a competition morning when someone is attempting to fit a 12-foot set piece through a trailer door that is clearly only 10 feet tall.

That is the moment reality enters the conversation.

Over the years, I've learned that designing sets for show choir is equal parts creativity, engineering, logistics, psychology, and occasionally emergency carpentry.

I've also learned that the most beautiful set in the world becomes completely useless if you can't get it into the performance venue, set it up in under two minutes, and remove it without causing a small traffic incident backstage.

Some of those lessons were learned the easy way.

Many were not.

The Year We Built a Masterpiece

Several years ago, our design team developed what we believed was the greatest set concept in show choir history.

It featured multiple levels, dramatic visual elements, moving pieces, and enough architectural detail to make a Broadway scenic designer smile.

On paper, it was magnificent.

In the workshop, it looked incredible.

Then we loaded it into the trailer.

Or at least we tried to.

What nobody had fully considered was that while each section technically fit inside the trailer, they fit together like a giant three-dimensional puzzle designed by someone who hated transportation directors.

Loading took nearly two hours.

Unloading wasn't much better.

By mid-season, every member of our tech crew had developed a look that suggested they were reconsidering their life choices.

The lesson was simple:

If portability isn't part of the design process, the design process isn't finished.

Portability Is Not a Bonus Feature

Many directors begin with one question:

"What would look amazing?"

The better question is:

"What would look amazing and survive ten weekends of travel?"

Show choir sets are not static stage scenery.

They're traveling scenery.

That distinction matters.

Every competition requires:

- Loading
- Transporting
- Unloading
- Assembly
- Performance
- Disassembly
- Reloading

Then you do it again next weekend.

And the weekend after that.

And the weekend after that.

Portability should influence every design decision.

Can it break down?

Can one person carry it?

Can students move it safely?

Will it fit through standard doors?

Can it survive being loaded at six in the morning by people who have consumed only coffee and optimism?

These questions are not glamorous.

But they are important.

The "One-Hand Test"

One of my favorite unofficial design standards is what I call the One-Hand Test.

Can a reasonably responsible teenager carry part of the set with one hand?

If the answer is no, we may need to rethink the design.

This doesn't mean every piece must be lightweight.

It means the set should be designed with transportation and setup in mind.

Every pound matters.

Every extra trip to the trailer matters.

Every complicated assembly process matters.

Especially at competitions.

The Great Reuse Debate

Every year, directors face a familiar question.

Can we use something from last year's show?

The answer is both yes and no.

Helpful, right?

Reusing set pieces can be one of the smartest financial decisions a program makes.

It can also become a creative trap.

Let's start with the advantages.

Why Reusing Sets Makes Sense

The most obvious benefit is cost.

Lumber isn't getting cheaper.

Hardware isn't getting cheaper.

Paint isn't getting cheaper.

If you already own quality scenic

pieces, there is no reason to ignore them.

I've seen directors transform old platforms, arches, stair units, and scenic walls into entirely new concepts.

A fresh coat of paint and creative redesign can make familiar pieces feel brand new.

The audience doesn't know that castle wall used to be part of a city skyline.

They just know it looks good.

Storage space is also valuable.

Programs that reuse elements often maximize investments made over multiple seasons.

Smart programs build scenic inventories rather than entirely new productions every year.

The Risks of Reusing Too Much

The downside is creative fatigue.

Students notice.

Parents notice.

Judges sometimes notice.

Nothing kills excitement faster than hearing:

"Wait... isn't that the same thing we used last year?"

Show choir thrives on innovation.

Every season should feel unique.

The challenge is finding the balance between financial responsibility and artistic freshness.

Sometimes reusing the framework while changing the visual treatment provides the perfect solution.

The bones remain the same.

The audience experiences something



entirely new.

Competitions Are Not in Your Auditorium

One of the biggest mistakes directors make is designing sets specifically for their home stage.

The competition circuit operates under a completely different set of realities.

Your beautiful auditorium may have:

- Large wings
- Ample storage
- Generous backstage space
- Convenient loading access

Competition venues often have none of those things.

I once attended an event where backstage space was approximately the size of a walk-in closet.

Every participating group was attempting to store scenery, props, costumes, and equipment in the

same area.

It looked like a garage sale hosted by Broadway.

The programs that succeeded were the ones whose sets were designed for efficiency.

The programs that struggled were the ones whose scenery demanded excessive space.

Design for the venue you'll visit most often—not the one you rehearse in every day.

Your Tech Crew Is Not a Construction Company

Perhaps the most important lesson I've learned is this:

Design for the people who will actually move the set.

This sounds obvious.

It isn't.



If a scenic element requires a detailed instruction manual, three specialty tools, and an engineering degree, it may not be competition-friendly.

The best competition sets often appear more complex than they actually are.

They are intentionally designed for speed.

Simple connections.

Clearly labeled sections.

Minimal assembly.

Maximum visual impact.

That's the sweet spot.

Build It or Buy It?

This is one of the biggest decisions facing programs today.

Many scenic concepts are developed by adults standing comfortably around a conference table.

The actual setup is performed by students carrying equipment through crowded hallways while navigating schedules measured in seconds.

The tech crew should always have a voice in the design process.

Ask them:

- What worked last year?
- What slowed setup?
- What caused problems?
- What was difficult to transport?

They know things.

Important things.

Painful things.

Listen to them.

One year, a student tech leader pointed out that a particular scenic unit required six people to assemble because

of an awkward connection point.

The design team initially dismissed the concern.

By the third competition, everyone realized the student was absolutely correct.

The unit was redesigned.

Setup time immediately improved.

Sometimes experience speaks louder than sketches.

The Two-Minute Rule

Many competitions provide limited setup time.

Very limited setup time.

In some situations, every second counts.

When evaluating a design, I often ask:

Can this be assembled quickly under pressure?

Should you build your set or purchase one?

The answer depends on several factors.

Reasons to Build

Building offers flexibility.

You control:

- Design
- Materials
- Dimensions
- Functionality
- Budget

Programs with strong booster support and skilled volunteers can create incredible scenery at relatively low cost.

There is also tremendous pride in performing with something your community built.

Students often feel a deeper connection to the production.

Reasons to Buy

Purchased scenic elements offer

consistency.

Professional fabrication often provides:

- Better durability
- Cleaner finishes
- Reduced labor
- Faster completion

For programs lacking construction resources, purchasing may actually save money in the long run.

The key is evaluating the true cost.

Not just dollars.

Time.

Volunteer hours.

Storage.

Maintenance.

Stress.

Those things have value too.

The Hardware Store Hall of Fame

Every experienced set designer has a collection of stories involving last-minute hardware store runs.

I certainly do.

One memorable season involved a scenic element that repeatedly lost the same bolt during transportation.

Every weekend.

The same bolt.

Every time.

We eventually started carrying an entire bag of replacements.

Another year, a caster wheel failed halfway through loading.

Picture twenty students, three adults, one trailer, and a scenic wall that suddenly refused to move.

The wheel chose retirement at the least convenient moment imaginable.

We laugh about it now.

At the time, the vocabulary was considerably more colorful.

Those experiences taught an important lesson:

Always bring spare hardware.

Always.

Trust me.

Design for Success

The best show choir sets accomplish several things simultaneously.

They support the story.

They enhance visual impact.

They travel efficiently.

They respect the tech crew.

They fit the budget.

And perhaps most importantly, they disappear when necessary.

Great scenic design should elevate the performers rather than compete with them.

The audience should remember the show.

Not just the scenery.

Final Thoughts from the Trailer

After years of designing, building, loading, unloading, repainting, repairing, and occasionally apologizing for set-related disasters, I've come to appreciate one simple truth:

Good set design begins long before the first board is cut.

It begins with understanding how the

set will live throughout an entire season.

Where it will travel.

Who will move it.

How quickly it must be assembled.

What resources are available.

And whether it can survive repeated encounters with parking lots, loading ramps, trailers, and exhausted teenagers.

The most successful show choir sets aren't always the biggest.

They aren't always the most expensive.

And they certainly aren't always the most complicated.

They're the ones that work.

Weekend after weekend.

Competition after competition.

Season after season.

Because at the end of the day, the goal isn't simply to build something impressive.

The goal is to create a visual environment that allows students to shine.

And if you can accomplish that without anyone getting trapped behind a scenic wall in a loading dock at six in the morning, consider it a successful season.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Ed Bauer has been in publishing for over twenty years. He was introduced to Show Choir by his daughter and he is forever grateful to her for this wonderful gift.



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