FIRST® Robotics Competition Fundraising Guide

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Introduction

This guide was created by *FIRST®* Robotics Competition Team 6328, Mechanical Advantage, in collaboration with *FIRST®* HQ. Thank you to Team 6328 for helping us create this guide!

This guide is intended to be an introduction to fundraising for *FIRST* teams. It was created for *FIRST* Robotics Competition teams based in the United States but most of the content is also applicable to *FIRST®* LEGO® League teams, *FIRST®* Tech Challenge teams, and teams based outside of the United States in all *FIRST* programs. Teams should also review additional Team Management Resources from *FIRST* for additional helpful information.

Overview

Why Fundraise?

Running a *FIRST* Robotics Competition team can be expensive. Basic expenses can include registration fees for one or more events, hardware and stock for creating robot parts, tools to build the robot, travel and transportation costs, and more. Many *FIRST* Robotics Competition teams operate with a minimum of $15,000 - $20,000 in expenses and often significantly more but some teams operate with less.

For some teams, a school district or other fiscal sponsor may cover some or all of these basic expenses, but other teams may need to raise all the funds on their own. Fundraising can also provide resources to broaden the scope of what teams do for technical learning, outreach, and program growth.

Additionally, working with students to create and execute a fundraising plan will help them learn the full real-world engineering process that accounts for budget and deadlines as well as technical resources and expertise. Writing an elevator pitch or grant proposal and approaching potential sponsors are tangible and productive skills for high school students to learn.

A few key points to remember as you review this guide:

1. The information presented about fundraising is applicable to all types of *FIRST* Robotics Competition teams, whether run through a school, a fiscal sponsor, an independent nonprofit, or another entity.
   a. A **fiscal sponsor** is a nonprofit organization that provides fiduciary oversight, financial management, and other administrative services to a secondary organization. The secondary organization uses the fiscal sponsor's 501(c)3 nonprofit status. Common fiscal sponsors for *FIRST* teams include 4-H, Boys and Girls Clubs, and Hack Club Bank.

2. You do not need a professional background in grant writing or donor development to be successful with fundraising. You just need a willingness to try, and then choose what to take on based on what you feel like you have the time and energy to learn.

3. There is no "right" way to fundraise. You decide what works best for your team, your community, and the people doing the work. Every team is unique and what works one year may not be appropriate the next year. That's ok.

4. The information and ideas presented in this guide are meant to spark your ideas and creativity. Whatever your team chooses to do for fundraising, try to put your own unique spin on it so it is engaging and represents your team.

5. Sponsorships and grants generally do not automatically renew. You must reapply for funding each season.

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Preparing to Fundraise

What is the secret to successful fundraising?

Preparation.

The key to successful fundraising is all the preparation work that is done before you ever approach anyone to ask for support. If all the needed information is available, the data is at hand, and the pieces are ready to go, the execution of a fundraising plan becomes much smoother and more efficient.

For team sustainability, it is recommended that teams try to end a season with some amount of surplus to help get the next season going before returns from fundraising efforts kick in. If your team does not have that year-to-year surplus, think about building it into your budget and fundraising goals.

Additionally, many grant applications will require budget information about expected expenses and potential income.

Create a Budget

Creating your team's budget is crucial to success – you need a thorough understanding of the bare minimum expenses, wish list or nice-to-have expenses, and the expected sources of income. Knowing what the difference is between your expenses and income will help you target your fundraising efforts to meet your team's needs – are you looking for $1,000 or $40,000? Do you need $10,000 before the team can even exist for the season? Are you focusing on team growth? Are you targeting nice-to-have bonus funds or looking to replace or expand capital equipment and machinery?

Considerations – Expenses

Some of the questions to ask when considering what your anticipated expenses will be:

- What do you need to pay for registration fees, robot parts, tools and supplies, facilities and overhead, outreach supplies, travel expenses, etc.?
- Will you be investing in any capital equipment?
- What expenses are required to run your team vs. expenses for items that are nice to have?

As you make a list of expenses, keep track of which ones could be met through in-kind donations where a person or company donates goods or services instead of money. Providing in-kind options gives others the flexibility to support the team even if they don't have easy access to cash. You can be creative based on what works for your team. Common in-kind donations include:

- Screen printing services for apparel
- Laser cutting, water jetting, or sheet metal services for parts manufacturing
- Sets of hand tools, nuts/bolts, or other standard shop supplies
- Leftover blank stock (tubing, sheet metal, etc.) from manufacturing shops
- Team meals from restaurants
- Discounts on lodging from hotels
- Bookkeeping services

Considerations – Income

Some of the questions to ask when considering what your anticipated income will be:

- If you are part of a school system, what does your school pay for?
- Are there any existing fundraisers you already run?
- Do you collect any activity fees?

Sample *FIRST* Robotics Competition Expenses

Always confirm the specific registration fees for your team's regional or district events with your Regional Director or Program Delivery Partner. The registration fees and other expenses in the table below are for example purposes only and are not comprehensive. Your budget may vary significantly depending on where you are located, which events you attend, and the number of students/mentors on your team. Outside of North America, expense numbers may vary even more dramatically depending on the cost of shipping and distance to travel.

Expenses in the table are given in U.S. dollars.

Table 1: Sample Budget

	Regional – North America	District	Regional - Outside North America
Initial Event Registration	$6,300	$6,300 (2 District events)	$6,300
Additional Event Registration	$3,000	$1,000 (fees may differ by district)	$3,000
District Championship Registration	n/a	$4,000 (fees may differ by district)	n/a
Championship Registration	$5,750	$5,750	$5,750
Robot and Prototyping Parts	$5,000	$5,000	$10,000
Field and Game Elements	$1,500	$1,500	$3,000
Travel and Robot Shipping Costs	$8,000	$4,000 (may increase for travel outside the district for Championship events)	$30,000
Outreach Programs	$500	$500	$1,500
Machinery and Supplies	$500	$500	$1,500
Team Administration and Overhead	$1,000	$1,000	$2,000
Other	$1,000	$1,000	$2,000
Total	*$32,250*	*$30,250*	*$64,750*

If you do not yet have an official budget or financial tracking system for your team, there are templates available that work well as a starting point. You can then customize the template as appropriate for your team.

- *FIRST* Robotics Competition Budget Template courtesy of *FIRST* (automatic download in Excel format)
- *FIRST* Robotics Competition Budget Template courtesy of Bryce Hanson (automatic copy in Google Sheets format)

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Financial Logistics

The next step is to understand the logistics for how your team will be able to accept monetary and in-kind (service or product rather than monetary) donations. There is no one "right" way to be able to accept donations and the specifics will depend on your organization. The key is to know what to tell potential donors and make the process of their donation as seamless as possible.

Often, one of the first questions from a potential donor will be whether the donation is **tax deductible.** Being able to make a tax-deductible donation is a benefit to the donor and confers legitimacy on your donation request because it means the team is following fiscal and organizational regulations.

Other questions to consider include:

- Who will send a tax acknowledgement letter or form to the donor if needed?
- How will the team accept, track, and acknowledge the value of in-kind donations (such as water jetting services, screen printing on apparel, or donating equipment)?
- Do your team mentors have access to a bank account that makes funds easily accessible?
- Where and to whom should donors send monetary donations?
    - Is the answer the same for cash, paper checks, and electronic transfers (EFT, Venmo, etc.)?

There are many ways to accept cash donations to your team. Very often, teams use several of these methods at once. For example, a school-based team may have grants for registration fees paid via the *FIRST* Dashboard, accept local communication donations through a booster club, and pay for school-managed travel through a school district account.

The table below describes some of the advantages and challenges with the various entities that can accept donations on behalf of a *FIRST* team.

Table 2: Methods to Accept Donations

	Advantages	Potential Challenges
School District account	School district responsible for financial accounting and regulatory compliance	Going through school district offices to manage and use funds can be a cumbersome process
FIRST Dashboard	Paid directly to *FIRST* using *FIRST's* 501(c)3 nonprofit status and financial accounting systems. See "How can I make a donation on behalf of a specific *FIRST* team?" on *FIRST's* donation page	Restricted funds can only be used for expenses paid to *FIRST* (such as registration fees); unrestricted funds require a regrant process to use for other expenses (applicable for *FIRST* Robotics Competition only). Refer to *FIRST's* regranting process for the most up-to-date information.
Booster Club	Separate 501(c)3 outside of the school administration for donations and grants	Coordination with the school district; managing an independent organization with financial and regulatory compliance requirements
Fiscal Sponsor (4-H, Boys and Girls Clubs, Hack Club Bank, etc.)	Access to 501(c)3 status, sponsoring organization manages financial management and regulatory compliance	Required adherence to fiscal sponsor's regulations, may charge a fee
Independent 501(c)3 Nonprofit	Fully independent governance and financial autonomy	Creating and managing an independent organization with financial and regulatory compliance requirements

For more information about creating and managing an independent 501(c)3 organization, refer to *FIRST* Robotics Competition Team 6328's guide "Establishing a 501(c)3 for *FIRST* Robotics Competition Teams". For additional information, see Section 6 of *FIRST's* Fundraising Toolkit page.

Mentors and parents **should not** directly accept donations for a team, school, or nonprofit organization. Doing so can have personal tax implications in the U.S.

Sponsorship Tiers and Benefits

Potential sponsors want to know if there are any direct benefits to them and/or their organization in return for sponsorship. Generally, this is provided through a tiered sponsorship program with additional benefits and recognitions added for higher sponsorship values. While sponsorship tiers can be used to entice organizations to donate and provide benefits to the sponsors, they are also used to demonstrate your team's gratitude and appreciation for your sponsors. Searching online for *FIRST* Robotics Competition team sponsor tiers/benefits will return dozens of examples.

Tips and Recommendations:

- Create 3-5 tiers of sponsor benefits
  - For example: $100-$499; $500-$999; $1,000-$1,999; $2,000+
- Create more valuable benefits to add on to each tier, keeping in mind what your team can truly follow through on delivering and what would be appealing to potential sponsors
  - Don't promise to give a 10-foot cardboard cutout of your robot if you can't follow through at the end of the season or if that's not something a sponsor would want to display
- Common benefits and recognitions include:
  - sponsor logos and shout outs on social media, websites, team apparel, and on the robot itself
    - Include website links and tag social media accounts in online shout outs
  - Thank you cards from the team
  - Robot demos and presentations at the sponsor's facility
  - Invitation to visit with a tour at a competition
- Reserve the benefits that are the most appealing to organizations (name on the robot, for example) or require the most work to follow through to higher level tiers

Create a Business Plan (Optional)

Creating a written business plan for your team is not required to achieve fundraising success, but it can be helpful in several ways, including:

1. Focusing your team on thoughtfully answering internal questions about long term goals, barriers, financial history, team strengths, etc. that may not have been explicitly identified and discussed
2. Demonstrating to potential sponsors and grant funding organizations that your team has a solid understanding of your organization, finances, and long-term goals

Business plans should be reviewed and updated each year to ensure the goals and data accurately reflect your team and the current season. They do not need to be lengthy to be useful. In general, 3-4 pages of information plus 2-3 appendices are plenty to describe all the necessary information. Longer business plans are harder for audiences (and judges) to process all the information presented and take up valuable time to put together. But the decision about the level of detail and number of pages in your business plan and how much time your team devotes to putting it together is up to you.

FIRST provides some useful templates and worksheets for creating business plans for *FIRST* Robotics Competition teams on the Team Management Resources page. These resources include the Business Plan Worksheet and the Business Plan Template (editable word doc – automatically downloads).

Craft Your Story

Crafting your story means knowing and documenting the key talking points that are most important for telling an engaging and compelling story about your team. It does not mean spending hours and hours writing lengthy documents telling the narrative of your team. If you are in a conversation, you should be able to tell the key points of your team's story in 2-3 minutes, similar to an elevator pitch.

The key points of your team's story should answer the questions:

- What does your team do?
- What is your team's mission statement? Short- and long-term goals?
- What makes your team unique?
- How will a donation or sponsorship positively impact your team?
- How does your team impact the larger community?

Gather the Data

Once you've defined the key points of your story, look for data and statistics over the last few years that you can use to show that your team is successfully working towards your stated mission and goals. Consider implementing a system for tracking volunteer hours, attendance at outreach events, and other activities if you don't yet have one. The questions below are examples but what data and statistics are best to represent your team will depend on your team's unique community and activities.

- How many outreach events does the team run or participate in and how many attendees are there? What are the demographics of the participants?
- How many hours each week do mentors and other adults volunteer with the team?
- How many hours each week are students working with the team?

What data is available to help describe your team and who you reach?

- What towns, neighborhoods, schools, etc. do you draw from?
- How many students are on your team each year?
- What are the general demographics of your team members (grade, gender, ethnic diversity, socioeconomic status, etc.)?
- What are the general demographics of the local community where your team operates?

What are your team's major activities and accomplishments for the last few years?

- Make a list of outreach events the team has attended or run
- What skills have students in your program learned?
- What are your team's alumni doing after graduation?
- What are your team's event successes?
    - Event success is not just about final standings and awards – did the team work with a new technology? Did they implement a new organizational process? Was the robot reliable in each match? Did they try a new scouting system?

Some grants also require a report of activity of how funds were used in the season, so keeping track of this data is a great habit to develop for the team.

Online Presence

Creating at least a basic online presence for the team also helps confer legitimacy to the organization when you approach potential donors. It creates a type of proof that the organization actually exists and does what you say it does. This online presence can be a basic website built using free tools or simply a social media page that has basic information (the key points you've developed to craft your story) about the team, including how to donate.

Craft a Compelling Story

Why then How then What

HOOK	SOLUTION	CALL TO ACTION
Paint a picture and make a connection	How you provide a solution that works	What are you asking for?

PROBLEM	BRAG
Simple explanation of what you're trying to address	Proven impact and exciting accomplishments
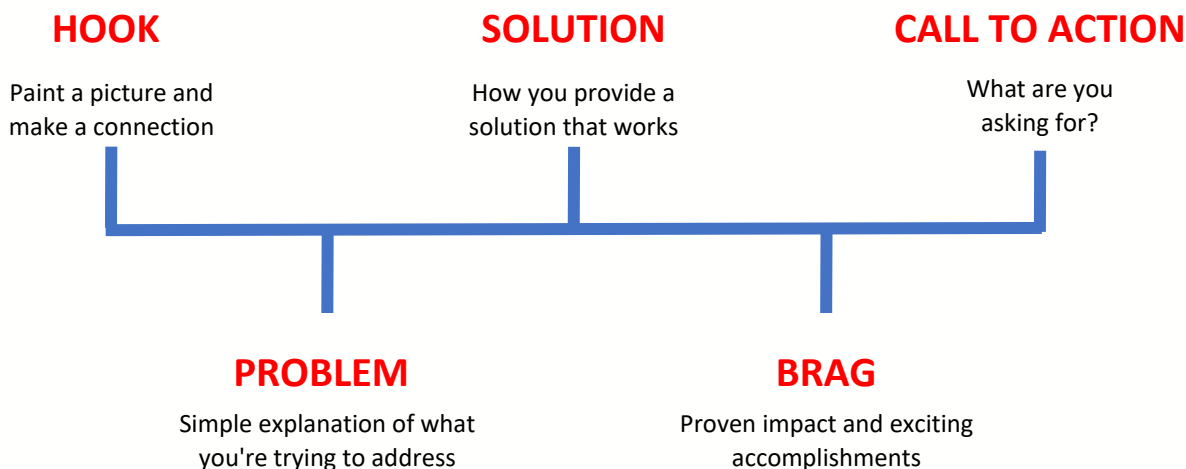
A compelling story for your team will have five specific parts. All five of these parts should be short enough that you can verbally tell the story in 2-3 minutes.

1. **HOOK** – First, get your audience to pay attention to your story. The hook is the tool for doing so. Paint a picture with your words and put your audience into the situation to make them care about what you care about and establish a personal or emotional connection.
   - *Example: "Imagine walking into a high school stadium filled to the rafters with fans bedecked in their favorite team's colors and jumping up and down while cheering for their team on the field. You turn to the field and instead of student athletes you see robots dashing around the arena, robots that are built by high school students. It's the only sport where every student can go pro if they choose."*

2. **PROBLEM** – Briefly, what is the problem your team is trying to address? This may change based on the specific call to action you're going to make. Are you trying to raise funds to purchase a piece of equipment or are you looking for general sponsorship?
   - *Example: "High school students need opportunities to learn what engineering is like in real-world situations, so they are prepared for college and careers in STEM fields."*

3. **SOLUTION** – Offer a brief explanation of how your team provides a proven solution to the problem you described.
   - *Example: "Our students design, build, program, and test a 125-pound robot designed to play a game. They work through all parts of the engineering process themselves in a way that mimics industry projects."*

4. **BRAG** – Don't minimize what your team has accomplished, but also remember that awards and event wins may not be your team's most exciting or proudest accomplishments. Focus on the impact your team has had on your students and their futures, and your community.
   - *Example: "100% of our students go on to higher education and 95% of them stay in STEM fields in college and beyond. They go into college classes and internships already*

prepared to design under real-world constraints, document their success and challenges for others, and present to panels of leadership teams."

5. **CALL TO ACTION** – Give specific details about what you are asking for from your audience. Do you need a monetary donation or services they provide? Do they have a connection you'd like to be introduced to? Do you want them to volunteer with your team? Give specifics while also leaving room for them to offer something else if they can't meet that specific request.
   o ***Example:*** *"We are asking if your print shop would be willing to donate services to create and produce our team banners this year, or maybe charge for materials only. Anything you can do would help the team and leave our scarce funds for other critical purchases. Thank you."*

Considerations and Cautions

The Considerations

- Know your audience and personalize your story to what might appeal to them. Appeal to their perspective, their personal interest in what you do, and their potential motivation for supporting your team.
- Infuse your story with a relatable but relevant story, personal experience, or heartwarming anecdote to connect with the audience at an emotional level. People who feel a personal connection are more likely to come up with a way to support the team.
- Know the points you want to make, especially for an in-person conversation or phone call, so you can direct the progress of the conversation towards your goal.
- Practice what you want to say. Being able to tell your team's story and make an ask of someone is a learned skill and students (and adults) need space to practice and gain confidence. If writing an email, ask one or two others with experience to review and offer suggestions. If talking to someone in person, practice going through your key points out loud with others.

The Cautions

- Don't present a problem without also showing that your team provides a solution. The fact that you can show a solution will help draw people in to support the team.
- Don't recite lists of statistics about the team and your impact, especially in an initial contact when you need to get your points across quickly and succinctly. Statistics have a useful place, but not usually in the initial short story. Have the data ready for follow up conversations once the prospective donor has shown they are interested.
- Be careful of using insider language that people outside of *FIRST* Robotics Competition or *FIRST* will not understand even though **you** may use the terminology every day. "*FIRST* Impact Award" is meaningless to anyone without the context of what that award means within the *FIRST* Robotics Competition program. Ask someone unfamiliar with *FIRST* Robotics Competition to review your key points to help ensure the public will fully understand what you are trying to say.

Share your Story

Gather materials into a sponsor information packet that can be shared with potential sponsors and donors. These materials are generally most powerful when they are easy to read, engaging, and reflect team branding and when they include eye-catching graphics such as photos of the team and robot and simple infographics. There are many free tools available online, such as Canva, that can help you quickly create flyers, graphics, and other elements of a sponsor information packet.

It can be helpful to include a QR code on your materials so potential donors can quickly access your team's website or donation page. For people who aren't familiar with *FIRST* programs, photos and short

video clips easily accessible on a website can help them conceptualize what your team does and why it's so important to support as an investment in the future.

In addition to explaining what your team does, include information about how your team's program and mission can benefit a potential sponsor. This includes the tangible benefits associated with the sponsor recognition tiers you developed and promoting the sponsor's name in the community on website, apparel, etc. as well as intangible and longer-term benefits like workforce development, future employee skills, and community relationships.

A sponsor information packet and other materials should be created so that they can be printed, published online, downloaded from your website, or emailed. Include all the information a potential sponsor or donor might need:

- Team name, number, and basic information such as towns and/or schools served
- Team mission/vision and high-level goals
- Why your team is asking for support
- Sponsor recognitions
- Specific instructions for getting donations to the team
- Tax-deductible donation status
- Examples of in-kind sponsorships that are helpful

Additional information about creating sponsor information packets is available in How To: Sponsor Relations.

Simple Fundraisers

There are a lot of options for running simple fundraisers that can produce small but reliable funding for the team with relatively low effort. These fundraisers have the benefit of getting the team out and visible in your school and community while generating funds for projects. However, your team may be trying to run these fundraisers in the same community as many other school and community groups so bear in mind that you'll want to avoid asking the same group of parents, families, and friends to contribute at the same time or in quick succession after other organizations, school clubs, youth groups, etc.

Please check in with appropriate school administration or other authorities as applicable before planning any fundraisers or fundraiser publicity on school grounds.

Restaurant and Shopping Nights

Often, local restaurants or retail businesses will work with school groups and nonprofit organizations to run fundraising nights where a percentage of the sales over a set time will be donated to the group. Stores usually schedule these fundraising events on days when sales are traditionally slower in the hopes of enticing more customers to the store or restaurant.

These nights are usually very easy to set up and usually only require reaching out to the manager of the restaurant or store. How much the night raises is largely dependent on the team's ability to publicize the event and draw crowds at the appropriate time. Try to publicize repeatedly for a few weeks ahead of time in as many places as you can – school newsletters, social media, websites, emails to families, etc. for the best results. You can also ask if you have team members at the location during the fundraising event to raise awareness of both the fundraiser and the team.

Product Sales

Product sales can cover everything from bake sales to branded merchandise like t-shirts to concession sales at an event to 3D-printed items like keychains. Setting up product sales takes a little bit of planning but can quickly raise moderate funding.

Questions to answer for planning product sales include:

- What do you want to sell?
- Are you buying items like snacks to sell at a concessions stand for a markup or are you making items to sell?
    - Who is what is the cost of supplies and who is covering that cost? Will you reimburse those costs or are you asking for supplies to be donated?
- How will you price the items so that they are appealing to purchase while still earning a profit for your fundraiser?
- Where will you sell these items?

If you want to sell items in person, target areas or events where you'll see high foot traffic of people who have some amount of easily accessible money and will feel good about supporting a local school or nonprofit group. This can be at a school event, a craft fair, a farmers' market, a town festival, a local park or library, a coffee shop, or anywhere many adults and families will be passing by. Always get permission from the appropriate authorities before setting up a fundraising table.

Searching online will provide many different examples of products that can be used for fundraising and you can be creative! There are many online suppliers for standard or special edition branded apparel and other merchandise such as CustomInk, Spreadshirt, Bonfire, Teespring, and Redbubble. When creating branded merchandise, do not use images and text that have a copyright or trademark that you don't have permission to use.

Other successful product sale examples in addition to bake sales and branded merchandise include:

- Beaded bracelets
- LEGO earrings
- Holiday ornaments

- Small potted plants
- Tubs of flubber or goo
- Crafting/coloring kits

Crowdfunding/Peer-to-Peer Sites

Crowdfunding/peer-to-peer fundraising is the practice of funding a project through raising money from many people making small donations, usually online.

Crowdfunding and peer-to-peer fundraising is accomplished by directly asking for donations from your networks via online fundraising sites such as GoFundMe, Classy, OneCause, etc. Many social media sites such as Facebook and Instagram also provide tools for crowdfunding. These sites are easy and straight-forward to set up but generally have a fee (small percentage of the donations) and are designed to run for a set block of time rather than as an ongoing donation portal.

Because of those parameters, crowdfunding and peer-to-peer fundraising usually work best when you are trying to generate donations for a specific purpose or project, such as the one-time purchase of a new piece of machinery or transportation costs to take the team to *FIRST* Championship. People who donate via these sites like to feel part of helping the team accomplish a specific and tangible goal rather than general operating costs.

Use crowdfunding and peer-to-peer campaigns judiciously. Asking your community and network to contribute to campaigns like this more than once a year is rarely successful and has the potential of creating a negative perception and dwindling participation.

Cash Back Programs

Some retail organizations offer cash back or loyalty rewards programs that allow shoppers to generate a small donation from their purchases. Nonprofits can register to participate through an application that usually requires documentation of nonprofit status. This can be another low-effort method of generating income and just requires encouraging community members to sign up for the program. One example in the midwestern United States is Kroger Community Rewards through Kroger grocery stores.

Fundraising Events

Running fundraising events takes effort, planning, and a group of committed people to make it successful and may require some up-front investment in supplies. But for all that effort can have a bigger payoff in fundraising compared to the simpler fundraisers. They can also serve as outreach events to showcase your team to the wider community and may be the primary option in areas that lack businesses or other foundations that provide sponsorships.

When planning a fundraising event, one of the keys to success is to make it engaging for your unique community – what types of events appeal to the families in your area? Be creative and hold an event that is unique to your team for even more engagement.

Searching online will yield many results of different types of fundraising events along with planning checklists to help get you started with a new event but try to adapt generic checklists to make the event unique to your team and draw in your local community. Some common examples include:

- Pasta dinner
- Car wash (check with your local police, fire, or school department to see if they can provide the location)
- Flamingo flocking
- Graduation balloons
- STEM camp
- Group yard sale (ask for donations of items from families)
- Online auction
- Game or movie night
- Hack-a-thon or read-a-thon with a pledge drive
- Fun run

Raffles

State and Local Regulations

Before holding any raffle, fully understand your state and local laws about charitable gaming, nonprofit raffles, and games of chance including whether your organization can hold a raffle and what record keeping is required. A raffle is a game of chance and even if it benefits a nonprofit, it is usually included in regulations about gaming alongside lotteries, casino games, sports betting, etc. Online and interstate sales of raffle tickets can also be difficult because of different state regulations about charitable gaming.

There can be legal implications if a raffle is handled incorrectly, so seek advice from a local nonprofit or small business attorney if you are unsure about anything.

For example, the regulations in Massachusetts in 2024 include:

- All nonprofits and schools must apply for and be awarded an annual raffle permit issued by the state which requires being in good standing as an organization with the state Attorney General's Office
- Within 30 days of any raffle drawing, all nonprofits and schools must file a state raffle proceeds form and pay a 5% gaming tax to the state
- All nonprofits and schools much file an annual raffle report with the state and describes all raffles over the past year and provides name/address of all winners of a raffle prize valued at $250 or more
- There are additional auditing and record keeping rules if a raffle ticket costs more than $10 or if the raffle includes a prize valued at more than $10,000.

Types of Raffles

If you are confident that you can hold the type of raffle you want to under your state and local regulations, raffles can be an easy and fun way to quickly fundraise. Always keep records of the number of tickets sold, funds raised, winner's contact information, and value of prizes.

There are several popular types of raffles

- **50/50 RAFFLES** – 50/50 raffles are generally the simplest to set up and run, and work best at a specific, one-day event. Ask people to purchase a ticket and the winning ticket drawn at the end of the night takes half of the collected ticket sales while you keep the other half.

- **CALENDAR RAFFLES** – Solicit donations like gift cards or small services and items, enough to have at least one for each day of a month. Ask people to buy a ticket for the calendar and draw a winning name each day of that month for that day's prize.

- **GAME SQUARES** – Create a game day (often football or basketball) pool of squares and ask people to purchase squares. People in the winning squares split part of the pot and you keep the remainder. There are many resources online with instructions to run game square pools.

- **BASKET RAFFLE** – Ask for donations from the community and local businesses and put together prizes. People then buy tickets and put them in the pot for the baskets they are interested in. Draw a winner from the pot of tickets for each basket.

- **BIG-TICKET RAFFLE** – This raffle requires finding a donor who can give a high value raffle prize, or you need to have the confidence that you can sell enough raffle tickets to cover the cost of the prize and still make the effort of running the raffle worthwhile in terms of fundraising. One example of a Big-Ticket Raffle is selling $50 raffle tickets for a chance to win a $3,000 designer handbag. **Note:** Big-Ticket Raffles can have extra reporting and auditing rules depending on your state or local regulations.

Sponsorships

The line between "sponsorship" and "grant" can be blurry and the terms are often used interchangeably by teams, the public, and the donor organizations. For the purposes of this guide, "sponsorship" refers to contributions made by a company or organization that your team has directly solicited for a donation outside of an application process, and "grant" refers to contributions made from a foundation or other grant-making organization that also requires an application and selection process.

Where to Find Sponsors

One of the most reliable ways of finding sponsorships is to leverage all the personal connections you can identify. When approaching potential sponsors, whether through email, a phone call, or in person, go back to all the work you put into preparing your sponsorship information and crafting your team's story. Know your key points about why someone would want to sponsor your team and what the benefits are to them.

Once you've connected to a potential sponsor, directly ask them for what your team needs and start the conversation from there. "A $200 sponsorship could provide XYZ for the team this season. Are you able to help?"

Employers

Make a list of parent, grandparent, mentor, and student employers. There are many companies that are familiar with *FIRST* and have funds set aside for sponsorship if a team has an active mentor or parent who is an employee. Even if there aren't specific *FIRST*-designated sponsorship funds, employers often

have community development funds available for employee requests. If you don't know where to find out more information within a specific company, the employee can ask the Human Resources department who oversees community development or community relations and provide the appropriate people with the sponsorship packet your team developed. Are there friends, other local family members, or even neighbors with employers who may be open to helping? Don't overlook parents and mentors that run their own small businesses and may be able to make a small donation for a local team they have a connection to.

Employers don't have to be direct sponsors to be able to help support the team. Take advantage of **corporate donation matching programs** where the company will match (double) donations made by employees to nonprofit organizations or schools. Additionally, many employers have **volunteer hour programs** and will donate at a per hour rate for employees who volunteer with an organization. This means that parents and mentors who volunteer their time with the team can submit their volunteer hours, and the team would receive a donation for those hours.

Reach out to as many of your team members and families as you can through email or other internal communication channels and ask them to check with their employers to see if any of these programs are available to them. School and community newsletters can also reach a wider audience if the school administration allows you to include information about your team and sponsorship opportunities.

Local Businesses

What are the local business names on the back of the local youth sports league shirts? Who sponsors local PTA or PTO events? Do local school events have sponsors? Who advertises in the high school theater playbill? This can help identify local businesses that have already sponsored other organizations or teams and are open to the concept. Keep a shared list of potential local sponsors.

In most states, the Office of the Attorney General will have a website with a searchable database of local businesses and corporations. Search for all listings in your zip code or municipality and make a list of appropriate businesses to approach for sponsorship. If you have limited time and/or resources, prioritize businesses in technical industries (such as manufacturing, engineering, software, etc.) over more unrelated industries (such as early education, health care providers, personal care services, etc.). You may be able to find similar local business listings through the Better Business Bureau, Chamber of Commerce, and other business networking communities.

In addition to locally owned businesses, include local branches of larger businesses on your list. Sometimes the local management has some discretionary funds to sponsor local groups and teams.

Media

Use local media outlets to tell a short story about your team and state that you are looking for sponsors. This can include on-air media (radio, local cable stations, or other broadcast media), print and digital news media (news outlets, community magazines, local advertising books, etc.), and other local communication channels.

Create social media posts stating that your team is looking for sponsors and what you are looking for.

Importance of Community Outreach

There's so much power in the connections made at community outreach events – demonstrations and STEM crafts/activities at the library, town fairs, holiday parades. Be visible in your community so that local business owners and residents know the team, what you do, and your impact. This helps lay a foundation and build recognition for when you approach these businesses for potential sponsorships. When your team is at a local community outreach event, have sponsorship information available to hand out and key talking points prepared in case an opportunity presents itself.

Can you ask to schedule a demonstration or shop tour with the mayor's office or at a city council meeting (or whatever is the equivalent municipal board or council in your area)? Invite the state legislators for your district to an open house at your workspace because they usually love to hear about youth programs in their district. These are relationships you can build to help you make connections in the local business community.

Templates like Outreach Plan Worksheet and Community Engagement Worksheet can help you plan community outreach events.

In-Kind Sponsorships

A donation of money is not the only type of sponsorship available. Sometimes, a company may have an easier time donating goods or services instead of trying to free up money in their monthly cash flow. In your preparation work, you made a list of potentially helpful in-kind sponsorships and donations. As you reach out to sponsors, use that list to help identify companies you want to approach and personalize the ask so they know that in-kind donations can be just as helpful to the team as money.

Sponsor Outreach Campaign

Once you have a list of companies and organizations from various sources, **create a shared spreadsheet** or other means of documentation that includes columns for company name, contact info, priority, what to ask for, dates and methods of contact, and outcome. Then, the team can dig into the actual sponsor outreach campaign.

Running a sponsor outreach campaign can be a robust learning opportunity for the students on the team. Learning how to discuss what they and the team do and how to ask is incredibly valuable and provides skills that will be applicable in many facets of their life as they move forward in education and career regardless of their field. Additionally, potential sponsors can be more receptive to receiving an ask from students than from the team's adults. As much as possible, work with your students so they are involved in the following steps.

1. **Research, research, and more research**
   If you don't already have the information, use the online search engine of your choice to research companies on your list to learn details about what they do, contact information, websites, office locations, etc.

2. **Sort your list by priorities**
   What are your team's priorities for which companies to reach out to first? This priority list looks different for every team. Use the shared spreadsheet you created to assign priorities, which might include:
   a. Previous sponsors
   b. Parent and mentor employers
   c. Needed in-kind products and/or services
   d. Local technology industry companies

3. **Create templates/scripts with room for personalization**
   Work together to create an email template and/or phone script that students can personalize based on their individual role and experiences.

   Review the templates with students and offer editing and feedback. Writing scripts and templates is a new skill for most people.

   For in-person outreach or phone calls, practice and role play ahead of time to smooth out your talking points. Again, this is a new skill for most people so practice will help create confidence and smooth out the delivery.

4. **Reach out to ask for sponsorship**
   Send the emails, make the calls, and walk into local businesses
   a. Keep an eye on emails accounts for replies and respond as quickly as possible to questions or sponsorship and donation offers
   b. If the team is going to send emails to potential sponsors, is there a team email account available so team members aren't using their personal email accounts?
   c. Keep emails as short as possible while making the point. Most emails aren't read past the first paragraph, so include all high-level information at the start and then include necessary details in following paragraphs.
   d. Gracious Professionalism applies to outreach campaigns
      i. Take a "no" with grace and respond with a polite "thank you for your time."
      ii. If it's a "yes" be ready with the next steps to make the sponsorship happen

It's expected that many of the answers in a sponsor outreach campaign will be "no" and that's ok. Note the outcome of the interaction in your list and save the contact info for potential sponsorship in future seasons. When reaching out companies that haven't already approached the team about sponsorship, the positive response rate is generally 2-5%. That will likely be higher among parent and mentor employers and previous sponsors. In the end, the response rate can still yield enough donations to make the time and effort worthwhile.

Maintain Sponsor Relationships

Sponsor retention is a key to team sustainability. It's more efficient and effective to keep an existing sponsor year after year than find a new one because you've already shown them the benefit of your program. It's harder to start from scratch every year. Sponsors want to feel that they are a true partner and have contributed to the team's success in whatever way you define that success.

1. **Keep track of your sponsors and what they donate each year.**
   Make use of that shared spreadsheet and keep the information up to date. One way to show sponsors your appreciation is to know what their contribution has been.

2. **Communicate the impact of their sponsorship.**
   What was the team able to do with the sponsorship and how did it make an impact on the team's season? Communicate that impact with them directly so they know they make a difference and that their contribution is appreciated.

3. **Cultivate ongoing and long-term relationships with sponsors.**
   Nurture relationships by sending consistent and positive communications with sponsors such as short email updates throughout the year, updates before and/or after competitions, invitations to outreach events, thank you notes from students, etc. You can invite sponsors to see your workspace or get a personal tour at a local competition. Some teams host a Sponsor Open House once or twice a year for special "backstage" access to the team and their programs. The specifics of *what* you do aren't as important as maintaining communication in whatever way works for your team.

   It's easier for a sponsor to say "yes" to donate again next season when you've built a relationship with them throughout the year and have consistently reminded them of the impact you have on your students and community.

Grants

Grants are less about approaching companies and asking for donations and instead focus on an application process for funds available from organizations, foundations, and other grant-making institutions. Sometimes the applications are short and relatively simple to fill out; other applications can be lengthy with extensive budget and data documentation requirements. Before starting a grant application,

take time to review the applications questions so you can determine if you have the necessary data available and if it is worth your time and resources to apply.

Where to Find Grants

Independent grant-making foundations can sometimes be more difficult to find than potential sponsors among local businesses in your area. If you don't have the resources to spend time pursuing grants, at least look at the grants available directly through *FIRST* on the Team Grant Opportunities page to see if any apply to your team.

Once again, finding grants is largely about research. What foundations and organizations are listed on other teams' websites, robots, and apparel? Is there a plaque on a local public building (concert venue, museum, library, etc.) or a donor page on a local museum website that lists foundations that support them? Search for those foundations online to see if they have an open grant application that applies to your team. Other organizations that may have grant funds available include:

- Local banks with a foundation for community development
- Workforce development groups
- Local service organizations such as chapters of Rotary Club, Lions Club, United Way, etc.
- Local community development groups
- Local school district
- State or local government STEM education initiatives
- Local business networking groups

For local community development groups and local service organizations, watch for opportunities to partner with them and provide mutual support. Maybe the local Rotary Club runs a fundraising carnival and your team can provide student volunteers, which can help cultivate a relationship between the organizations.

When looking at a potential grant, know what criteria the funding organization is looking for when selecting grant recipients. Most grant organizations will spell out their criteria in some or all of the following areas:

- **Area of focus** – look for organizations that want to fund education, youth development, STEAM programs, etc.
- **Geographic area** – some organizations focus on funding grants in the same states/cities where their business is also located.
- **Non-profit status** – does your team have access to a 501(c)3 through your own organization or a fiscal sponsor?
- **Size of organization** – Some grants specifically look for smaller organizations with local impact and others want to fund large operations with national impact.
- **Deadline** – when is the grant application due, and do you have time to put together a strong application?

Grants via the *FIRST* Dashboard

FIRST has partnered with some companies to provide team grants directly to the team's *FIRST* Dashboard. When applying for these grants, please understand the restrictions about how those funds can or cannot be used – some may be used only to pay for *FIRST* registration fees, for example. You can find more information about *FIRST* Dashboard grants on the *FIRST* Regranting Process page.

Standard Grant Application Questions

There's no need to reinvent the wheel for every grant application. You can develop short- and long-form answers to some standard grant application questions to pull from as needed. Then, wherever you can, customize answers for the specific organization you are applying to so you can show how your team

supports their mission and goals. Always save a copy of every grant application you submit so you can refer back to it or use those answers as the starting point for other applications.

Some common grant applications questions include:

- Describe your organization's goals/mission/vision
- Describe your specific program and its history
- What is your organization's structure and how are responsibilities divided?
- Explain your annual budget and how your arrived at that budget
- What makes your program unique?
- What needs are you addressing in your community?
- How do you define and measure success for your program?
- What is your program's impact and how do you measure that?
- How would funding help your organization?
- Why should we provide funding to your organization?

Record Keeping

Changeover is a built-in part of the *FIRST* programs as students graduate, teachers change, and mentors move on, so documentation of institutional knowledge becomes a key component of ensuring team sustainability. For fundraising, that institutional knowledge can include:

- Which businesses and organizations are approached for sponsorship
    - Which ones give, decline, or have no response
    - Avoid duplicate requests to the same business in a season
- Contact information
    - Name, email address, phone number
    - Company website
- Personal connections
    - Parent/mentor/family employer or other connection?
    - Connection made at an outreach event?
- Which grant applications are submitted
    - Links and deadlines
    - Which are approved, declined, or have no response

Additionally, tracking sponsorships, grants, and the amount of funding they provide is necessary for financial auditing and provides valuable data for setting budgets in future seasons.

Additional Resources

FIRST Fundraising Toolkit

FIRST Team Management Resources

FIRST Team Grant Opportunities

Grant Database (courtesy of *FIRST* Robotics Competition 353 and *FIRST* Robotics Competition 358)

Sponsor Packet Template (courtesy of *FIRST*, .doc file automatically downloads)

Sponsor Processing Template (courtesy of Bryce Hanson, .xlsx file automatically downloads)

Budget Template (courtesy of Bryce Hanson, .xlsx file automatically downloads)

Fundraising 101 (courtesy of The Compass Alliance)