

Show Me the Money: Real Fundraising Solutions From Real Botball Team Leaders

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1 The Problem

Despite years of intensive and ethically questionable botanical experiments, money does not yet grow on trees, and the odds of winning a Powerball Grand Prize are precisely 1: 146,107,962 [1]. So how exactly are you supposed to come by the \$2300 necessary to register for the Botball Program? Beyond that, how do you pay for yourself and your students to travel to the regional workshops and competitions, not to mention the International Botball Tournament held every summer during the National Conference on Educational Robotics?

Even with a Botball scholarship, most team leaders struggle to find funds season after season. Yet for some teams fundraising seems to come naturally. Some team leaders are able to fund multiple teams, travel to the regional tournament and the National Conference every year, and are always styling custom Botball T-Shirts. *How do they do it?*

1.2 The Techniques

As I conducted phone interviews with team leaders from around the country, I began to realize that the most successful fundraisers utilized similar techniques. Some of these techniques included thorough research of potential sponsors; seeking help from friends, family, and former students; and fundraising year-round. Let's examine each of these, along with some variations and additional ideas.

2 Technique 1: Corporate Sponsorship (or the lack thereof)

Consider this scenario:

It's common knowledge that Botball **is** the greatest thing since sliced bread, **and** you have several students who desperately need a creative outlet before they become federal-website-hacking-delinquents, **but** you need a sponsor to help get your team rolling. Your team decides that [Multi-Million-Dollar-Corporation A] and [Multi-Million-Dollar-Corporation B] have *lots* of money and they should be your sponsors. Contact is arranged. Discussions are had. But your efforts fail and you don't know why.

Funding failure can often be attributed to a lack of planning and research. Did Companies A and B share any commonality with Botball, STEM, or education? That is,

do the companies have a history of funding hands-on educational activities in STEM areas, or a practical interest in those areas? Or, rather, do they have a history of funding social development or arts programs? Robot-builders are more likely to get help and sympathy from a company like Boeing than from the National Endowment for the Arts. The maxim here is: *Botballer, know thy sponsor.*

2.2 Company Benefits

Jeffrey Cumber, leader of the Robert E. Lee Botball teams in Jacksonville, FL, has been very successful at finding the right companies to fund his teams. Jeff looks for companies and grants that fund workforce development and equipment for classrooms. He emphasizes to these organizations that the best way to teach math, science, and engineering is through the hands-on style that programs like Botball provide. This type of learning better prepares students to be skilled members of a future workforce, thus returning the companies' investments.

2.2 For Your Consideration

Some types of companies that have funded Botball teams in the past:

- Oil and Natural Gas Companies
- Electric Companies
- Engineering and Architecture
- Banks
- Newspapers
- Real Estate Companies
- Telecommunication Companies

2.3 Finding an 'in'

Jeff also seeks an 'in' at the companies he approaches for funding. Do you or any of the students on your Botball team have friends or relatives working for a corporation that could potentially fund your team? Many companies give preference to programs seeking funding if their employees are directly or indirectly involved with the project.

If you don't have an 'in' through your team, consider sending an email out to all the teachers in your school or district explaining your Botball team's purpose and that you would like to seek funding at a particular company. Ask if they know someone who works for the company, and if they could perhaps recommend your team for consideration. Be polite, honest, and straightforward, and quickly follow up on your strongest contacts. Keep your team updated and involved, as this approach also helps demonstrate the concept of social networking to students.

3 Nan i ke kuma

The Hawaiians have a saying that, roughly translated, means *return to your source*. David Askey, self-proclaimed "**terrible** fundraiser" and coach of the Norman High Botball team in Norman, OK, takes this idea to heart. Norman High has been participating in Botball since 1999, and thus has a relatively long list of former team members. David contacts Botball alumni each year for funding. Collectively, they are

the NHS Botball team's biggest supporters! Many of them are successfully working in the engineering and robotics fields, and feel that participating in Botball opened these paths for them. David says that the ex-team members are more than willing to give something back to the program that helped them, and to pass help along to future colleagues.

3.2 The Snowball Effect

In addition to the direct funding that comes from the veteran Botballers, most of their employing companies offer 'matching donation' programs. When a former student issues the Norman High Botball team a \$300 check, the company issues an additional \$300 check bringing the total donation to \$600. Let's say you are able to use this approach. If your team can find only seven alumni whose companies will match donations, and who contribute only \$150 each, you've practically reached your registration goal already!

4 Fundraising 24/7. Well, figuratively speaking...

...because, frankly, the idea of non-stop fundraising year-round makes me want to run screaming into my panic room and curl up into a trembling ball. I wouldn't wish constant fundraising on anyone except certain political figures, so I certainly don't want Botball team leaders to feel like that is the way to go. Because it's not. The team leaders I spoke with weren't literally fundraising around the clock but they *were* looking for fundraising opportunities around every corner. Additionally, they were fundraising even when they weren't sure what the money would be used for. The Robert E. Lee team wasn't sure that they wanted to travel to the International Tournament this year, but they performed so well at the regional competition that they had the opportunity. They had also been fundraising throughout the year, giving them a budget surplus that enabled them to have some NCER trip 'seed' money to begin with.

Each team leader tried numerous creative ways *throughout the year* to raise funds for their Botball teams. Some of the ideas fell flat and some of the ideas turned out to be lucrative endeavors that they will implement again.

4.2 For Example:

Teacher Car Wash: Sure, you can have a car wash on a Saturday afternoon with your team in front of the local grocery store. Many teams do this and it works out well for them. Or, you could have a *teacher car wash* – where students pay a flat rate to have the teacher or administrator of their choice hose down their neglected and dirt-encrusted Subarus. Students place the orders in advance so you'll know roughly how much you can look forward to making, and also how many vehicles you'll need to prepare for.

Candy Sales: Decades of exhausting research have revealed that people like candy. They are willing to spend at least a dollar on candy bars, suckers, fruit snacks, and other assorted items that give dentists the willies. If you buy in bulk from a discount store like Sam's or Costco and charge enough, you will make a decent profit. If it is OK with your administration, have the team members sell candy in the stands during sporting events or other student activities.

Charge Dues: If you are having trouble getting administrative support for your team, consider charging your team members dues. Granted, each school and school district is different, so this idea might not work for every team. But consider the possibilities: if you have a 15 person team and you charge each member \$75 to join, you've just raised \$1125. If you have students who would like to participate but can't come up with that amount, set a goal for the student to sell \$75 (profit) worth of candy.

Video Game Tournaments: Video game tournaments are a low-overhead fundraising solution. Many teams have implemented several tournaments a year (each with different games) because they are so successful. School libraries are an ideal venue – if they let you 'check out' televisions to use for the tournament. If you don't have enough games and game systems to go around, ask kids to bring their own and then give them a discount off the tournament entry fee. Keep in mind that you'll need to provide some sort of impressive trophy-type-thingy.

5 In Conclusion

Successful fundraising is a task that has a lot in common with successful robot-building. The team needs to be creative; try to come up with unexpected or out-of-the-ordinary strategies. Accept that not every attempt will work out, and be prepared to go back to the drawing board. Maybe the basic plan is solid, but the details need a little tweaking.

Remember, the type of people/students who are drawn to this field are natural problem-solvers. Give them the freedom to think through the problem, and they'll surprise you every time with an innovative solution.

References:

[1] Powerball. http://www.powerball.com/powerball/pb_prizes.asp, 2007.