

THE SPONSORSHIP SPACE

How Zach Rubin Went From 2006 Intern To Negotiations Of Over \$600M in Sponsorship Deals

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With no prior connections and just a passion to be in the sponsorship industry, Zach Rubin's story is a one with a common theme – the importance of building authentic connections.

As a freshman at Lehigh University in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, Zach applied for an internship contest with the then New Jersey Nets and to his surprise, he received a call back. However, it wasn't exactly the news he expected. One of the team's HR representatives called to tell him he won the internship contest and had a spot lined up for the franchise's fall 2006 program. As he was in Pennsylvania for his freshman year, he of course could not attend and asked whether a spot was available for the summer. The HR representative informed him that they didn't have a spot for him, but they loved his enthusiasm, so they promised to reserve a spot for him the year after.

One day, after hearing the news, Zach's father Alan Rubin - a dentist in Rochelle Park, NJ - happened to connect Zach through a patient of his to Eric Bechtel, the founder of Rule 1.02 Marketing based in Saddle River, NJ. After meeting with Eric, Zach joined the Rule 1.02 team that summer for his first sports marketing internship in which he worked directly with Eric on the strategic planning for buy-side, blue-chip sponsorship consulting clients such as Ask.com and Burger King. Here, he learned the ins and outs of how to build a strategic plan for a client, leveraging data to inform decision-making, as well as how to negotiate with potential partners. His time at Rule 1.02 Marketing was of critical importance to his future and laid the foundation for his current role at IdeaQuest.

Eventually, the following summer, the Nets followed through on their promise to Zach and he interned in their corporate sponsorship department. It turned out to be an exciting time as the Nets were gearing up for a relocation to one of the most technologically advanced stadiums in the country, the Barclays Center in Brooklyn, NY. The move to the Barclays Center turned out to be exactly what Zach needed to help expose him to the sell-side of the sponsorship world as he got an opportunity to work closely with Brett Yormark (now CEO, BS&E) and Mike Zavodsky (Chief Revenue Officer, BS&E) finding corporate sponsors.

It was here where he started building a skillset through his accountability for sponsorship outreach, cold calls, research and presentation development. It just seemed to be the right place, the right time and the right mindset for Zach - he just wanted to absorb it all from rising executives in the industry.

While at the Nets, what really struck him was Yormark and Zavodsky's ability to personally connect with anyone each time they entered a room. Zach learned much from shadowing these two executives and learned the importance of being prepared in advance of those meetings. Specifically, he learned that even though one can have the ability to connect with people naturally, if you're not prepared to offer value during those interactions, it's an opportunity gone to waste.

It was a quick but exhilarating summer for Zach and before he knew it, his internship was over; he had to think about where he would spend his next summer. Zach had now experienced life at a boutique agency and at a prestigious property, but was interested in learning more about a large agency. His former boss at Rule 1.02 Marketing - Eric Bechtel - introduced him to George Pyne, the former Chief Commercial Officer at NASCAR, who was at the time leading IMG Worldwide team. After a few conversations and interviews at IMG, Zach received an internship role that covered Marketing, Consulting and Talent, and even an opportunity to assist senior leadership designing a new motorsports series in China. With IMG, he placed more of a priority on learning about brand positioning, the various attributes associated with different properties (whether talent or property management) and most importantly how to build out research programs to inform strategic decision-making.

At this point, after finishing multiple internships and school coming to a close, Zach was facing a crossroads – does he pursue his dream of being the next Jerry Maguire by going to law school or continue to build on the skillsets he was developing in marketing and sales. Ultimately, he ended up committing to law school but after 6 months knew it wasn't the right move – that's when his mentor Eric came back into the picture. At the time, Eric's company Rule 1.02 Marketing had just been purchased by former European Tour golfer Chubby Chandler and his company International Sports Management (ISM), the talent agency that represented former World #1 Lee Westwood and major champion Rory McIlroy (among others).

With offices in Johannesburg, New Delhi and London, ISM wanted to breakthrough in the United States and when Eric reached back out to Zach about joining on the new adventure with ISM, representing elite golfing talent for marketing and endorsements, there was no hesitation. In fact, within the first 6 months, this opportunity is where Zach negotiated his first endorsement deal on behalf of managed talent – a sunglass endorsement between Sundog Eyewear and Louis Oosthuizen.

The working relationship with ISM was strong for over a year, however, the ISM U.S. arm spun off into a standalone corporate consulting venture called IdeaQuest, where he has been for the past 7 years. Zach now leads the Consulting division and is responsible for strategic planning, ideation, contract negotiation and execution for IdeaQuest clients including Fortune 500 brands American Family Insurance and Johnson Controls.

One of the first major sponsorships Zach worked on at IdeaQuest was with American Family Insurance and its category exclusive partnership with the Green Bay Packers, which included a mix of traditional brand building assets and experiential activities tied to Packers talent. That sponsorship led to flurry of new partnerships including the expansion

of the brand's Brand Ambassador platform, which included integrated campaigns around athletes such as Derek Jeter, Kevin Durant and J.J. Watt.

Recently, he worked on a series of content partnerships with new media brand The Players Tribune tied to sponsored short and long-form content featuring talent targeted to specific audiences, including the below "Scouting Myself" piece where Green Bay Packers' star Clay Matthews surprised an aspiring high school football player with lessons to help him succeed.

When talking to us, Zach mentioned that no matter how much homework is done behind the scenes of a sponsorship, sometimes the stars have to align to show return on investment. For example, after learning that Washington was a growth market for American Family Insurance and that they had an existing partnership with the Seahawks, he helped the AmFam team negotiate a deal with 3rd round rookie draft pick Russell Wilson, who happened to win a Super Bowl a year later, resulting in a ton of additional exposure for the insurance company. In 2015, he played a role in negotiating AmFam's first ever kit sponsorship with the MLS expansion franchise Atlanta United. Who would have thought a few years later, the soccer team would become the most valuable in Major League Soccer, current MLS Cup champions and build out of one of the largest fanbases in North American soccer!

Fast forward to now, Zach has negotiated close to \$600M in sponsorship agreements from naming rights deals to content partnerships and it doesn't seem like their team at IdeaQuest is slowing down. When asking him about one of the deals he's proudest of, he told us right away that it was the Pro Football Hall of Fame deal with Johnson Controls, one of a multitude of Johnson Controls partnerships he's helped build out to promote the company's innovative technologies and solutions. The agreement was over 18 years and is believed to be among the top 20% of all sports naming rights deals in total amount. It was designated the largest deal ever for a market the size of Canton, Ohio and that's not the most impressive part.

This was Zach's first naming rights deal ever, which was completed in 72 days (a really short turnaround for a publicly traded company, but a testament to the trust and transparency at the negotiating table). It's easy to see why this was something he was proud to have worked on.

When asking Zach about his advice for professionals coming up in the sponsorship industry, he mentioned the importance of understanding how to leverage research, learning how to effectively communicate in meetings, and staying organized and diligent. But as the conversation went further, he knew exactly what came to mind as the single most important thing. "Emulate people you see that are doing it right and follow their journey."

"Networking is more important than it's ever been – its not a cliché. Keeping great relationships will be imperative for your career." --- If there's anything I took away from Zach's story is that authentic connections can be built anywhere, even in a dentist's office, so don't be afraid to take on new challenges and meet new people along the journey...but when new opportunities arise, never lose sight of the importance of preparation.