

2025 SPONSORSHIP EXCELLENCE AWARD WINNERS ANNOUNCED

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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SEATTLE, September 24, 2025 – The Sponsorship Marketing Association (SMA) is proud to announce the winners of the 4th annual Sponsorship Excellence Awards, celebrated at the Sponsorship Mastery Summit in Denver, September 8-10. During the Sponsorship Excellence Awards Breakfast on September 9, the ceremony brought together leaders from across the sponsorship marketing industry to celebrate the visionaries, innovators, and trailblazers who are defining the future of sponsorship marketing.

“It is an honor to recognize the change-makers who inspire us and celebrate the organizations who are demonstrating innovation and leading the industry forward. SMA is proud to recognize these winners for their incredible accomplishments that are contributing to the industry’s growth,” said Paula Beadle, CEO and Founder of SMA.

Award winners were selected by the Sponsorship Excellence Awards Selection Jury, comprised of a distinguished group of industry experts with extensive experience in sponsorship marketing and strategic partnerships. The 2025 jury was led by Jared Wall, Vice President, Sponsorship Consulting at Momentum Worldwide, to ensure a comprehensive and fair evaluation process.

“The strategic brilliance and creative execution that the winners demonstrated reflect the continued evolution of the ways that brands and their partners drive meaningful connections and generate long-term value through sponsorship,” said Wall.

The following awardees were recognized:

Jeff Hansen, former Vice President Strategic Partnerships at Microsoft, received the Lifetime Achievement Award. This prestigious recognition celebrates Hansen’s enduring impact on the sponsorship industry—highlighting a remarkable career defined by visionary leadership, transformative strategy, and a deep commitment to mentorship and innovation.

From leading Microsoft’s first global advertising campaign to redefining how branded sponsorships and partnerships deliver business impact; Hansen’s contributions span decades. His ability to anticipate change, build and empower high-performing teams, and transform traditional marketing models has not only elevated Microsoft’s approach but has also inspired a generation of sponsorship professionals.

"I'm deeply honored to receive the Lifetime Achievement Award," said Hansen.

"Throughout my career, I've been fortunate to work alongside incredible people who believed in the power of partnership to drive real business value and social good. It's been a privilege to help shape this evolving industry and contribute to something larger than myself."

T1 received the Agency of the Year Award, recognized for consistently delivering measurable results, fostering innovative ideas, and building enduring client relationships. T1's unique approach is their blend of strategic rigor with cultural fluency, delivering bold ideas backed by business impact. T1 consistently creates partnerships that matter—grounded in community and designed to spark lasting connection. They are Black-founded, women led, and have been fiercely independent for 31 years, shaped by diverse lived experiences and entrepreneurial drive. Whether they're working with global brands or grassroots partners, in stadiums or in schools, their goal is the same: to deliver work that performs and leaves a legacy in the communities it touches.

Nithya Ramachandran, President & CSO of T1 Agency, and Mark Harrison, Founder of T1 Agency, joined SMA at the Summit to accept this award.

Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association received the Property of the Year Award, recognizing a property that has redefined what it means to engage partners and audiences. As the world's largest and oldest sanctioning body of professional rodeo with 600+ events annually, the PRORODEO proves that authentic partnerships and fan engagement never go out of style. They create programs that combine on-site activations, broadcast integration, digital storytelling, athlete endorsements, and grassroots engagement. PRORODEO delivers unmatched fan engagement through a combination of tradition and innovation. Fans get to experience the rodeo up close, interact with sponsors through immersive fan zones, live music, cultural showcases, and connect directly with athletes. Their success is built in relationships through fully integrated storytelling opportunities that resonates across generations.

Paul Woody, CMO of Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association, joined SMA at the Summit to accept the award.

Engelbert Strauss, or simply STRAUSS, received the Sponsor of the Year Award, honored to a brand or sponsor that exemplifies excellence in partnership. At the heart of every STRAUSS partnership is a drive to align with organizations that embody performance, passion, and resilience while supporting hardworking individuals and celebrating community. They became the first-ever helmet sponsor in Major League Baseball and Minor League Baseball history! This deal broke new ground in sponsorship visibility and global brand storytelling. Their workwear brand created a symbolic link between professional athletes and hardworking tradespeople, a stamp in history, and a legacy of

bolstering fan engagement. Strauss remains true to its identity – a workwear brand made for people who give 100%.

“This award is a celebration of our historic partnership with Major and Minor League Baseball and the teams on both sides who made it possible,” said Henning Strauss, CEO of STRAUSS, who joined us virtually for the award ceremony. “As the first brand ever on MLB batting helmets, STRAUSS embraces our role as a first mover, pioneering new fields of play for brands and redefining the playbook for partnerships.”

David Cipullo, Principal of Tigertail & Head of North American STRAUSS Partnerships, accepted the award on the company’s behalf.

The LEGO Group and Formula 1 received the Best in Show: Outstanding Activation in Sports Award, recognizing the most compelling, strategic, and creative sponsorship activation in the world of sports. F1 drivers got behind the wheel of fully drivable LEGO cars at the Miami Grand Prix. At a near 1:1 scale with Formula 1 cars, each build is made of nearly 400,000 LEGO bricks – all capturing the intricate and unique details.

Emily Prazer, President & CEO at Formula 1 Las Vegas Grand Prix and Chief Commercial Officer at Formula 1 accepted this award virtually.

“The partnership with LEGO has been something that’s given us the opportunity to reach loads more fans in the younger generation, which we are more excited about,” said Prazer.

Johnsonville and Summerfest received the Best in Show: Outstanding Activation in Fairs & Festivals Award, recognizing a one-of-a kind activation. Highlights included a collective eight-stage Happy 249th Birthday to America sing-along, Fortune Feimster’s crowd-pleasing comedy, and a dazzling sausage-themed drone spectacle that lit up the night sky—turning July 4th into an unforgettable experience.

When sponsorship feels like a celebration, everyone wins. By partnering with an iconic music festival like Summerfest, Johnsonville generated national interest with over 300 million earned media impressions, achieved record July 4th sales, and helped drive a year-over-year increase in Summerfest attendance on Independence Day.

Kevin Canady, VP of Sales and Business Development at Summerfest, accepted this award.

Culligan and Chicago Bulls received the Best in Show: Outstanding Activation in Events & Venues Award, honoring a campaign that made a lasting impression at an event or venue through creative integration, fan-first engagement, and exceptional execution.

Chicago Bulls, Chicago Blackhawks, and United Center teamed up with Culligan to eliminate single-use plastic water bottles at the largest indoor arena in the United States. They pioneered a recycling platform dedicated to aluminum can collection and driving sustainability messaging/awareness with fans. The brands were all positioned to help, complementing Culligan's purpose to make a real difference in the health and wellness of people globally. Eliminating single-use plastic bottles at United Center while creating branded experiences shows how purpose-driven partnerships can change the game. This is sponsorship with impact.

Abbe Gahart, Partnership Marketing Manager at the Chicago Bulls, accepted this award.

We Energies Art Collection at Baird Center received the Best in Show: Outstanding Activation in Arts & Entertainment Award, spotlighting a standout activation that brought art, music, film, or live entertainment to life through meaningful sponsorship.

The Wisconsin Center District created and showcased a fully immersive art gallery for the guest experience within Baird Center. The We Energies Foundation Art Collection has been carefully curated to portray the characteristics, culture, people, and landscapes of Milwaukee and the surrounding region through a series of unique engagements, including in-person touchpoints and digital extensions.

"We know that many people visiting Baird Center might not get to fully experience the Milwaukee community and what makes it so special," said Marty Brooks – President and CEO of the Wisconsin Center District. "That's why we were so deliberate in choosing the art for the collection. We wanted it to tell the stories of the diverse peoples that have shaped the area and continue to pour their energy into making it thrive."

Much of the art you see at Baird Center was created by local artists or artists with special ties to the area. Their collaboration helped bring awareness to the local arts and culture woven into Baird Center, for all guests visiting from local to international.

"The We Energies Foundation has been championing Wisconsin's world-class artistic talent for decades. In fact, arts and culture are a core pillar of our mission," said Beth Straka — President, We Energies Foundation. "We are thrilled to be recognized by the SMA for our partnership with Baird Center on an incredible collection that highlights local artists for a global audience."

David Schneider, Vice President of Corporate Partnerships of the Wisconsin Center District, accepted this award.

PGA of America received the Innovation in Sponsorship Award, honoring the pioneers who push the sponsorship industry forward. Breaking new ground in golf sponsorship and fan engagement, this activation shows what happens when tradition meets innovation. As

an example of new activation initiatives at the Ryder Cup, for the first time in 2025 the Ryder Cup will be hosting a streaming program called T-Mobile Breakfast at Bethpage that will show the passion and excitement around the first tee. The future of sports partnerships looks bright!

Luke Reissman, Head of Partnerships at PGA of America, accepted this award virtually. “Innovation in Sponsorship is about more than visibility, it’s about creating meaningful connections between fans, athletes and brands. When all of you watch the Ryder Cup, I think you’ll see how we’ve approached our partnerships with that spirit in mind,” said Reissman.

Abbott and The Big Ten received the Social Impact Award, recognizing a campaign, property, or brand that uses sponsorship as a force for good. This partnership saves lives while building community. Convincing a new generation to make blood donation a habit is critical to a sustainable blood supply. To help address this deficit, Abbott and the Big Ten launched the first college-conference-wide blood donation competition. Harnessing the friendly rivalries of college football, the “We Give Blood” drive aimed to rally students, alumni and fans to donate blood and help alleviate emergency shortages. Nearly 20,000 people donated, saving as many as 60,000 lives. The campaign brought in 69% first-time donors and coverage from top media outlets like Sports Business Journal, USA Today Sports, Sports Illustrated and more! The campaign demonstrated the power of using sports as a platform to promote a social cause.

Ben Meyerson, Director of Sponsorship at Big Ten, accepted the award.

The Rising Star award was given to Sari Schwartz, celebrating an up-and-coming sponsorship professional making waves early in their career. In just 3 years at Trajectory, she's built relationships across NFL, NWSL, Premier League, and Fortune 100 brands. Known for "always-on" relationship building - the future of sponsorship is in great hands! Despite being early in her career, Sari operates with the polish and confidence of a seasoned executive, engaging industry veterans as peers and consistently overdelivering in high-stakes deals. Sari has redefined how the team approaches client relations, team building, and operational alignment in partnerships.

SMA Member of the Year was awarded to the City of McAllen, in memory of Joe Vera. SMA honored Joe Vera, one of SMA's founding members and an avid Summit attendee. Vera’s spirit of curiosity, joy, and commitment to community lives on through everyone he connected with. Vera served as Assistant City Manager and helped build McAllen into one of the most dynamic event destinations in the country. He brought world-class creativity and hospitality to everything he touched.

To accept the award, the City of McAllen team members Aida Moreno, Carina Jimenez, Blanca Cardenas, and Leigh Woolridge joined us onstage.

**About the Sponsorship Marketing Association:**

SMA's mission is to strengthen, unify and advocate for the continued growth of sponsorship marketing and raise the level of excellence across the industry. SMA provides resources, insights and inspiration to help sponsorship marketers thrive. To learn more, visit www.sponsorshipassociation.com

About the Sponsorship Excellence Awards:

The Sponsorship Excellence Awards honor the visionaries, innovators, and trailblazers who are shaping the future of sponsorship marketing. Each year, the awards celebrate outstanding achievement across the industry—recognizing the brands, properties, agencies, and individuals whose talent, creativity, and impact are driving sponsorship forward. To learn more, visit <https://sponsorshipassociation.com/sponsorship-excellence-awards/>

About the Sponsorship Mastery Summit:

Created as a place for sponsorship marketers to find inspiration, discover new insights, and exchange ideas, the Summit is where innovative conversations happen and meaningful connections are made. The 7th annual Sponsorship Mastery Summit was hosted September 8-10, 2025, at the Grand Hyatt Denver. To learn more, visit: <https://sponsorshipassociation.com/summit/>