
SO, YOU WANT TO BE A PRO-STAFF?

by **Dustin Vaughn Warncke**

I get the question often: “How do I become pro-staff for product or service companies in the outdoor industry?” I cover this in some detail in my eBook, *The Outdoor TV Show’s Guide to the Industry*. I hold pro-staff positions with several different product companies as well as guide services and even a hunting ranch here in Texas. Here are the basics. Most pro-staff positions are paid in products or services and many times do not come with monetary compensation for the members. There are opportunities for making money as a pro-staff for some of the larger companies but getting to those opportunities is a process. One of the pro-staff positions I hold yields me two packs of product (over \$40 in retail value each) and a product T-Shirt (a \$20 value) each year and offers very attractive dealer pricing on other products, should I need to order more. In trade for this, the individual who receives a pro-staff position holds an expert position in that company and is expected to represent and help market that company wherever and whenever they are around other potential outdoor consumers.

Like most business relationships, pro-staff individuals have to make more than they cost the business in order for the relationship to work and for the company to grow and prosper. In other words, if you are just looking for free stuff and don’t plan to provide promotion in return, stop reading now. You may not think that a company has much tied up in sending free product out to their team but you have to consider their opportunity cost on products or services they give away for free compared to what they could have made if they sold it at retail cost. Add in the cost of production, shipping, and other factors and it quickly gets expensive for the company producing the product or service. At the end of the day, it all comes down to how much value you can provide the product or service you represent. Don’t expect something for nothing and be willing to work hard first for what you earn later.

In my case with this company I represent, I wear my T-Shirts at 3D archery tournaments and other places where an opportunity presents itself to promote their brand. The company gets inexpensive promotion and the pro-staffer gets free or discounted products, many times both, and recognition as an expert.

Where to Start?

I will answer the question of where to start with how I did it and what I would do if I had to do it all over again, starting with virtually nothing but a dream and a good attitude, and building from there. Since you don’t want to be pro-staff for competing product or service companies, consider applying for pro-staff positions in a variety of fields in the outdoor industry or encourage newer or smaller companies to start a pro-staff program and add you as a member. Newer or smaller companies usually need all of the promotional help they can get and you can usually get sponsored as a pro-staff member more easily than you can going after bigger, more established and well-known businesses at first. Our entire team of show hosts with Mac & Prowler’s “Coyote Tales” TV show hold numerous pro-staff positions as the more positions you hold in different segments of the industry, the more expertise you have to show prospective sponsors and other industry players.

Another idea is to start with developing a relationship with guide services or outfitters in your area as many of them have pro-staff programs or they can easily create a pro-staff team of preferred members who are experts. I

have even started out building relationships with guides and outfitters by paying for a trip or two and showing them the value I can provide them after I have experienced what they have to offer.

Developing a relationship with the owner or marketing department of a product or service company is essential to success and you have to start early. Don't just be another client or consumer. Show the amount of value you can provide them by working with you. Don't just ask for freebies. More on that in the next section. Companies, outfitters, and guide services have to know you and like you before they can trust you and be able to trust you before they will ever work with you. Build that trust by showing them what you can do for them. In other words, prove yourself! Don't expect something for nothing and be willing to put in the work to promote a product or service before you ask to be a pro-staff for them.

Circles of Influence

Most of us already have a "circle of influence" or groups of people who respect and follow advice we give and suggestions we have on a give subject. This is a key component of what businesses look for in selecting pro-staff members. Thankfully, you don't have to be on national TV or a huge internet star to have a large circle of influence these days. You can quickly and easily build out your circle of influence in many different ways.

If you don't already have a large following, one of the easiest and cheapest ways to get started with building a circle of influence is to use social media. It's free and you are probably already using it in some way right now. Don't be a spammer though. Engage with people. Create valuable content for your audience and it will grow organically. Social media, after all, is social. Don't just drop links to companies you want to work with and make it seem like you are promoting for them. Find helpful videos and articles and post why they are important. Comment on relevant news in the outdoor industry. I know many pro-staff members who are awesome at doing that and they have the following to show it. Here again we find that online relationships are built on trust and your potential audience has to know and trust you before they will take your advice or follow you as an authority.

Another great way to create an audience is to start a blog. You can easily set up a WordPress blog for free (www.wordpress.com) or install WordPress on your existing website if you already have a web hosting account. Blog posts are like short articles and you can write about virtually anything. If you visit my blog through my main website (www.dustinsprojects.com) you will see that I promote many different companies and products that I use in the field but also key the reader into what I am up to and how they can become a better hunter and fisher or enjoy a number of other outdoor pursuits. I also write about non-profit organizations like Crosswater Outfitters and Hill Country Bowhunters and even about subjects like spirituality in the outdoors.

After you have created content on your blog, you can easily promote it in social media in places such as Facebook, Google+, and LinkedIn groups as well as your own social media pages in Instagram or Twitter. The list goes on. Whatever you do, engage with people about how the blog post can benefit them. Even if you start out blogging about companies you would like to sponsor you, write about your experiences and give value to your readers. I often write about the sales principal I learned many years ago in my sales career. People listen to WII-FM or "What's In It For Me?" Find out some of the problems people face in the outdoors and write about them. Invite people to send you questions in social media and answer them in your blog.

Along with blogging as a format to reach an audience and build a following, there is also podcasting and videos. These can all go hand in hand. You can easily start a YouTube channel and purchase an inexpensive HD video camera new or used. If you do, consider investing in a wireless sound system, which you can also find new or used, as quality audio is something that is lacking in many videos on YouTube and other outlets. Consider [my eBook on starting an outdoor show](#) (shameless plug!) which you can find on my website at www.dustinsprojects.com. When producing video, make the attempt for it to look and sound like something that would air on traditional TV. The internet may be the future of how we watch TV but I have seen so many videos on streaming video sites like YouTube that are awfully filmed and produced. The higher the quality, the more people will be interested in what you have to say on a subject and consume more of your content. Make your content relative and interesting to the viewer. Some of my videos have tens of thousands of views and the main reason for this, I believe, are the quality of the sound and video as well as the informational content. My niche has been helping youth and adults new to the arenas of outdoor sporting pursuits to get started with the right equipment used the right way.

Podcasting is fairly easy to get started in as well. A podcast is much like your own radio show minus all the expensive studio equipment and commercials. Most young outdoor enthusiasts know what podcasting is and will at least give your podcast a listen for one or two episodes before they choose to subscribe to it or not. There are several courses online about what you need to set up a podcast. Like most things in life, watch some YouTube videos and read some blogs and articles and you will soon be well versed in what to do. I am currently working on launching my very own podcast soon with nothing more than my iPhone, a Smartphone app, and some audio editing software.

Promote your videos and podcasts in social media and on your blog. Once again, the goal here is to start building a following and grow your circle of influence. Run monthly analytic reports to see how many views, page visits, or downloads you have on all of your content. This is one of the tools you can use to show potential sponsors as your audience grows.

Pro-Staff Resume

As you start to accomplish goals, earn pro-staff positions, and gain other experience in the outdoor industry, start a document with all of your outdoor achievements much like you would a work resume. To see my outdoor industry resume, as an example, visit:http://www.dustinsprojects.com/Dustin_Warncke_Outdoor_Resume.pdf I make it a point to update my outdoor industry resume often and post it on my website so that potential sponsors can view it and see my credentials first before engaging with me. I have even gained pro-staff sponsorship from one large company without ever using their products but based on having a decent sized audience for my video, audio, and written content as well as my pro-staff resume, demonstrating my success as a pro-staff with other companies. In other words, I showed them that I knew the ropes on how to work as a pro-staff for other companies and have the potential to help them grow as well. The pro-staff resume has played a large part in my success in this industry.

Get Out There!

The late great Zig Ziglar once said, “You don’t have to be great to start but you have to start to be great.” This industry is a tough one to make it in because there are so many people who are competing for the same goal of being on the inner circle of a company. Pro-staff is a title that holds major responsibilities. If a company thinks enough of you to connect you with products or services at no cost, you better be ready to provide them with lots

of value in return. There is no free lunch in this industry. Everything has a cost. You have to be willing to pay that price. I have seen many folks lose their pro-staff title because they were doing little to nothing to promote a product or service and they slowly became dispensable and replaceable. As the sales and marketing manager of one of the companies I work with says, "As a pro or field-staff member, if you aren't actively helping us sell product, you won't be here for long. Plenty of other people want what you have." That same company had over 100 pro-staff members when I approached them about adding me as a member and they cut hard and deep to make room for guys like me who were actively promoting them. You have to earn your keep or prepare to get cut out of the game. Another important point that should be made here is that is vitally important to stay in touch with your sponsors on a regular basis. Let them know what you are doing to promote them, even if it's just a little work here and there. They are looking to hear from you from time to time. Also, and this should go without saying, never burn bridges. There is one outdoor show host I know of that has an awful track record of jumping from one company to another, leaving the previous company he worked with in the dust, all because he got a better deal somewhere else. News travels fast in this industry and you never want to be known as "that guy".

The theme of this article has been pretty evident. It's all about the tremendous value that you can provide. So get out there and build some new relationships! Start with companies who need promotional help first and build a circle of influence in the outdoor industry. My goal in the outdoor industry is to work a little every day on my dreams and goals. I have seen many of those goals come true because I have worked at accomplishing them day after day. Enjoy this journey. Don't get frustrated and keep plugging away. Good luck and have fun!