

Funding a Team

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The goal of this article is to share a few ideas on how to fund an independent team that is not sponsored by a school or organization. The focus will mainly be on corporate funding sources, but grants and fundraisers are other ways to fund a team.

As an independent team, one of the first barriers you will probably encounter is that most major companies and funding programs will not sponsor a team that is not registered as a tax-exempt nonprofit organization, or a 501(c)(3). You may then consider registering your team as a 501(c)(3), but given the relatively small funding needs of an FLL team (probably no more than \$1000 a year, exclusive of travel costs and extra competitions), you will likely find that it is not worth the legal fees and annual \$400 IRS filing fee to register as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.

So what are your options? Use your connections! Some FLL teams will ask a friendly FRC team (many of whom are associated with a 501(c)(3) nonprofit group) if they can accept sponsorships on behalf of your FLL team. Others will ask a robotics booster club or school PTA group if they can graciously do the same. You may even find a generous community organization like we did in the Columbus Jewish Foundation, who was willing to support our local team in this way. A few years later, our team connected with a local public charity in Educational Robotics of Central Ohio, whose mission is to support students in STEM.



Not all sponsors, however, require that they donate to a registered nonprofit. Our team, for example, has been sponsored for almost 10 years by our utilities company, American Electric Power, who provides funding for local FIRST teams. We have also been sponsored by very generous parents and grandparents. But in most cases, you will need to use your connections - through yourself, your team members, and their families. Some companies will make donations to groups that their employees volunteer time for (e.g., 40 hours of volunteer time), so this may be an option if you have parents who qualify and help the team in some way, for example by attending meetings or chaperoning events.

You and your team members may also have relationships with small local businesses, who are often willing to support teams in their community. These small businesses may be local orthodontists, community banks, service clubs (e.g., Rotary, Kiwanis), and veterans organizations (e.g., VFW). When approaching these businesses, it is best to have a personal connection and to humbly ask in person. Sending letters and emails is usually not as effective.

Most importantly, when you receive funding, be sure to have your team members send a personal thank you note. Make sure you continue to keep your sponsors updated on the team and how their generous sponsorship was used to help your students, as well as help others in the community through your team's outreach activities!