Creative Storytelling: For Sponsors, an Olympic Sport

Every two years, the world stops to watch the greatest show on earth: the Olympic Games. The appeal of the Olympics is universal; its impact, tremendous, and the London 2012 Summer Olympic Games were no exception.

Beyond the two weeks packed with excitement and good feelings, the 2012 London Summer Olympics is set to leave its own lasting legacy for Britain and the world.

THE POWER OF STORIES

The greatest legacy of the London Games, and of all Olympic Games, is in their stories. The stories that unfold during the Olympics turn into legends that stay with us and inspire future generations. Stories make us care. A powerful story can make us care about a sport we’ve never watched, a person we’ve never met, or a country we’ve never visited or even located on a map.

Among the stories we witnessed this past summer: American swimmer Michael Phelps becoming the most decorated Olympian ever; South African swimmer Chad le Clos—who was 12 years old when he was inspired by Michael Phelps in 2004—beating Phelps in the 100-meter butterfly; Jamaican sprinter Usain Bolt winning gold in both the 100 and 200 meters (and leading the Jamaican sweep in that event); and South African “Blade Runner” Oscar Pistorius competing in both the Olympics and the Paralympics. These athletes join icons such as track and field star Carl Lewis, a gold medalist in four separate Olympics, and gymnast Nadia Comaneci, still held up as an exemplar of perfection after scoring perfect 10s in 1976.

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Marketers understand the power of stories. That’s why brands work so hard to bring out their own stories on the world stage, from Coca-Cola celebrating 125 years of sharing happiness to Omega opening a museum dedicated to the history of its watch brand. Brands are more than products we buy. Brands are ideas we buy into. Stories, more than any other marketing component, facilitate that process of “buying in.”
THE CHALLENGE OF OLYMPIC SPONSORSHIP

The power to enrich brand equity by the values, stories, and associations linked with the Olympic Games has brands forking out hundreds of millions for the privilege of being called Olympic sponsors. But successfully activating an Olympic sponsorship presents a unique set of challenges. First, there is the challenge of being heard among so many sponsors vying for attention at the same time. Then there is the issue of relevance. How does a brand contribute to the Olympic ideal of “faster, higher, stronger”? How can sponsors prove that their brands are relevant to the Games?

Research by Nielsen found that Adidas was regarded as the most inspirational and most empowering brand among all the sponsors, and social media research from Sociability identified Adidas as the brand that created the most positive buzz during the Games.

For brands that don’t have an obvious functional connection to the Olympics, it’s harder to justify the appropriateness of a sponsorship. This is where the true art of marketing and creativity kicks in, especially in the form of storytelling. By telling great convincing stories well, brands can create very visible and successful sponsorship programs.

How does a brand contribute to the Olympic ideal of “faster, higher, stronger”? In their article “Building Brand Image Through Event Sponsorship: The Role of Image Transfer,” published in the Winter 1999 issue of the Journal of Advertising, Kevin Gwinner and John Eaton refer to two kinds of relevance for event sponsors: function-based similarity, where the sponsor’s product is actually used in the event, and image-based similarity, where the sponsor’s image is convergent with that of the event.

It is very easy for a sports brand to score highly on functional relevance. If we consider the 2012 Olympic sponsors, Adidas was the only brand with a very obvious and direct link to sports. As the Official Sportswear Partner of London 2012, Adidas led the way at the Olympic Games by outfitting more than 80,000 “Games Makers” (Olympic volunteers) and supplying kit for 3,000 athletes. The brand’s “Take the Stage” campaign was very convincing, and Adidas was fortunate in being able to sponsor some highly successful Olympians, including gold medalists Jessica Ennis (heptathlon) and Bradley Wiggins (cycling). No wonder Adidas saw the highest brand impact among the sponsors on many counts, including short-term sales pickup.

BMW, the Official Automotive Partner for the London Games

The story of BMW’s Olympic sponsorship is in the mileage it got out of product placement opportunities. One achievement was the showcasing of 4,000 cars dressed in Olympic livery as “best in class” in terms of fuel economy. Even more impressive was putting BMW-owned MINIs in view of close to one billion people around the world during the Opening Ceremony. But the real coup was the employment of a fleet of radio-controlled miniature MINIs used at the track and field events. In a stadium that was brand- and advertising-free, as many as 80,000 spectators (not to mention the television audience) could see the adorable mini-MINIs retrieving javelins, discuses, hammers, and shots, saving time and effort and drawing smiles all around. On the back of this entertaining MINI-spectacle, BMW rapidly climbed the table published by CityAM, jumping from fifth to third place by the end of the first week of the Games.
CREATIVE STORYTELLING: FOR SPONSORS, AN OLYMPIC SPORT

THE SILVER MEDAL GOES TO:
BT, the Official Communications Services Partner for the London Games

The story of BT’s successful sponsorship has its roots in the company’s early and unwavering enthusiasm for London’s bid for the Olympic Games. BT not only provided IT and technical expertise during the bid process, but also worked in a variety of ways to generate support for the bid among an ambivalent public. Then, after being announced as the Official Telecommunications Partner of the Games in 2008, they embraced the sponsorship opportunity, continuing to beat the drum for the Olympics and Paralympics. Using minimal advertising, they based their strategy on Olympic-themed activities, among them the sponsorship of the National Portrait Gallery’s “Road to 2012” exhibition as well as the sponsorship of a competition for would-be torchbearers. They consistently celebrated milestones to the Games; the celebration of “1,000 days to go” featured spectacular fireworks from the top of the BT Tower that were broadcast around the world.

It looks like BT’s strategy of focusing on activation and taking the Games to the people paid off, as on a modest budget BT generated over £60 million in media-equivalent coverage and engaged with tens of thousands of consumers.

AND THE GOLD MEDAL GOES TO:
Worldwide Olympic Partner Procter & Gamble for their outstanding multilevel campaign

P&G took on a multilevel challenge with their sponsorship: to link both the corporate name and a number of individual brands to the Games. And they met the challenge with a brilliant and multifaceted campaign that garnered acclaim from many sources.

The shining centerpiece of P&G’s effort was the corporate “Thank you, Mom” campaign, which featured both the P&G umbrella and individual brands. Ads that focused on “the hardest, best job in the world” paid tribute to mothers everywhere who sacrifice and work tirelessly to support their children. “Momumentaries” that featured the stories of great athletes as told by their mothers ran on TV and could also be viewed on Facebook pages set up for 29 countries.

Brand-level campaigns continued with the theme of raising an athlete. For example, ads for Fairy Liquid informed us that it takes 20,000 meals (and dishes) to raise an athlete. A Pampers ad featuring beach volleyball gold-medalist Kerri Walsh thanking her mom, Margie, achieved an unparalleled level of immediacy and relevance when it ran during the break of one of Kerri’s matches. After the Games, Pampers is continuing its “Spirit of Play” campaign, which features Olympians and their young children.

P&G’s laundry detergent Ariel starred in the “Proud Keepers of our Nation’s Colors” campaign, which was localized for countries from Mexico to Turkey, Ireland to the Philippines. And as a Londoner, I was very impressed by the “P&G Capital Clean-up,” a branded version of the annual Capital Clean-up, in which P&G sponsored a number of branded clean-up activities prior to the Games.

LESSONS FOR ASPIRING SPONSORS

If you are a brand marketer who aspires to someday compete on the world stage in sponsorship storytelling, what can you learn from the London Games? How can you emulate the most successful sponsors? We have the following suggestions.
MAKE YOUR BRAND A PART OF THE STORY

None of the brands on our medal stand had a functional connection to sports, but they found ways to weave themselves into the London 2012 story anyway. They looked for roles to be filled and created parts for themselves. BT was not only the communications specialist, but also a lead cheerleader for the Games and for London. BMW not only exploited the MINI’s heritage in evoking the home country’s pride, but cleverly created a functional role for the MINI. So whether you’re sponsoring the giant slalom, the Soap Box Derby, or a regional spelling bee, work your brand into the story of the event.

BE CREATIVE

As Dominic Twose points out in his POV “Creativity in Advertising: Eyebrows, a Greek Banquet, a Violin, and Some Invisible Fish,” creativity aids memorability. The right creative treatment can plant emotional associations so deeply that people simply can’t forget them. The mini-MINIs delighted us and fixed an indelible image in our memories, linking the cars to the Games. The P&G ads showing pint-sized, baby-faced competitors preparing to dive off the platform or mount the balance beam enabled us to see Olympic athletes as sons and daughters, and that vision filled us with pride—both vicarious pride in the upbringing of our national champions, and real pride in the hard work of rearing our own children (with the help of products from P&G). Find a new and different way to make your audience emote, or at least smile, and you have a chance to form a lasting impression.

GO THE DISTANCE

The successful sponsorships were the result of expansive vision and sustained effort. BT started early and stayed in for the long haul. P&G extended its vision across its brands—and rolled up its sleeves. It got behind the Capital Clean-up campaign, and in its home country, the United States, committed to raising $5 million to support youth sports programs. P&G may have sponsored the Olympics, but it used the opportunity to lend support to other ongoing causes—national and civic pride, and support for young people.