

Big sponsors make it hard to swallow

 By [Aki Kalliatakis](#)

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With the exciting but scandal-ridden Rio Olympics now in full swing, I was reminded again of the arrogance of the various sports governing bodies like the International Olympic Committee (IOC), and the Federation of International Football Associations (FIFA), cooperative politicians, and the huge corporations that provide money for sponsorships.



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When the Cricket World Cup was held in South Africa in 2003, I was thrilled to be lucky enough to get a ticket for the final at the Wanderers Bullring. My delight lasted until the front entrance of the stadium, for as I was about to enter with my cooler bag, my drinks were “confiscated” (read “stolen”) by a security man, because the official drinks sponsor would not allow customers free choices for their own drinks. Since that day 13 years ago, I have never bought or drank any of their branded products, and go out of my way to buy from their competition.

This pattern repeats itself at various important sports and other social events every year – and I don’t like it. And it’s not just drinks – you cannot wear a T-shirt or cap with a sponsor’s rival’s badge on it. You have to eat and drink the fat-, salt- and sugar-laden food of the sponsoring companies – at substantially higher prices. I bet that the ATMs in the stadium won’t even let you use a credit card belonging to the “other guys”. And don’t you dare try to wear your normal wristwatch or use your normal phone in the stadium, or it will be stripped off you together with your clothing! (Okay, I made up the last few.)

Legitimate businesses within a few kilometres of every stadium have to take down their own branding, and so do companies that have paid for advertising billboards in the so-called “exclusion zone”. (By the way, Budweiser, that American excuse for a beer, tried that during the Football World Cup in South Africa and put many people off the brand for life. It was all about greed rather than promoting local beer.)

I have no problem with marketing executives taking advantage of global events to get prospects' attention. It's a magical opportunity to be associated with the excitement and courage and triumphs of sports stars. But if you examine the rules governing Olympics branding – what is and isn't allowed – it becomes quite scary. Here are some of them taken from the IOC's own website. Remember that no business is allowed "... to use any intellectual property of the Olympic and/or Paralympic games without permission, or imply that your event, advertisement or promotion is related to or affiliated with the Games."

As far as I can ascertain, this means that using any of the following are strictly off limits:

- The Official Olympic and Paralympic branding, including logos, symbols, official designations, and even expressions such as "Olympics", "Olympic Games", "Rio 2016" and so on.
- The Olympic rings and Paralympic symbols, mottos, creeds, flames, mascots, posters and medals.
- Images of previous games. (Ridiculous!)
- Mentioning specific competitors, coaches, trainers or officials participating in the games without the permission of the IOC Executive Board. (Known as Rule 40, this is in place throughout the games as well as 15 days before and after the event.)

It's all just getting too much now, and I don't like it at all. It's come to the point now where sports sponsors even want stadiums to be re-named after their company: for me Ellis Park will always be "Ellis Park," no matter who pours money into its upkeep. It looks like all the PR spin about "free markets" and customer choice is just hypocritical corporate BS. It's corrupt and immoral – the ugliest face of capitalism gone mad – with weak and "democratic" governments allowing it to happen – for a fee. I'm not sure if these deals are actually even legal, and they have never been challenged in a constitutional court as far as I know.

Clever and courageous marketing people can agitate against this hypocrisy, and here are some possible ideas:

- Tell stories of triumph over adversity using the personal struggles athletes that don't really exist, and catchy slogans. (Guinness in the UK successfully used two rugby players including our own Ashwin Willemse in their gripping *Made of More* advertising campaign a few years ago. Its main theme was one of "against all odds...") You can even get your customers (or staff) to share their most inspirational moment in sport when they were playing or competing, and write these up.
- Special events are also a great excuse to communicate more with your customers. Forget about Valentines' Day and Bosses Day. Here is something that can be used weeks before, during and afterwards to keep in touch with customers. It becomes more powerful when you also choose specific themes for your communication: how teamwork creates success and friendships; how women have advanced in sport and the world in general; how competition can break down barriers and create acceptance of other people; the value of perseverance and endurance; or even how in the good old days people participated for the honour, not for the money. Tie these in to your own company's values.
- Use the theme of "competition" to generate excitement and get people involved. Get customers involved in interactive surveys: "What was your favourite part of the opening ceremony?" or "Which sport do you like best?" In one company, they even used "Office Olympics" for the staff to create amusing contests like which accountant counts a column of numbers fastest, and similar. There's also nothing stopping you for using a podium and a ceremony that almost replicates the one at the games, provided you don't use any of their symbols. Letting your customers become winners with a sales promotion is also fun – and they will reward you with their loyalty.

- Piggy-back or even hijack specific themes or events. For example, there's nothing stopping you from having a special promotional event in your business during the actual events such as the 100m final, or when a South African athlete or team participate in a final. Put up screens, get some drinks and snacks, run contests (or even a betting shop,) but get customers actively participating. And it doesn't have to be "live": you can also do it using emails and social media. For example, you can offer a special discount to anyone, (first 100?) who predicts an outcome.
- Use terms and related events or activities that they can't ban you from using freely. For example, there's no copyright on "Gold, Silver and Bronze," or on the use of olive-branch wreaths that were used in the original games. Alternatively, show a countdown clock on your website or your emails, or even in your business, without saying that it's a countdown to the Olympics. Everyone will know that, of course. Another example is how judges do their scoring in events like gymnastics, judo and diving, whether it is fair or unfair.
- And don't forget to use all the media channels that you can. In South Africa, most people that use the internet do it on a smart phone. How many people get on their phones to check final results? Why can't they come to your website or mobi-site to check out the latest? Are you there? And are you also using the power of all the social media?

Imagine if that day at the Wanderers had gone a bit differently. Instead of the bullying security official refusing to let me into the grounds if I didn't get rid of my drink, with a bit of insight, this negative experience could have been turned into a very positive moment of truth. Instead of banning the rival cola, the sponsor could have equipped and trained young staff at the gates to explain that they had paid a generous eye-watering sum of money to support this event, and to then offer to replace my drinks for free – or even with two bottles of their cola in exchange. No stress for gate officials and customers alike – and a cheap win for the sponsors.

Business life is filled with exceptional situations. If you plan ahead you can easily overcome potential negative conditions with positive, creative and generous ideas. It's not necessary to leave a bitter taste in your customer's mouth.

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