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# Branding lessons from the Olympics

By Donna Rachelson

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The world has caught Olympic fever and South Africans are glued to their TV screens thanks to the likes of Chad Le Clos, Cameron van der Burgh and the lightweight men's four rowing team, who have bagged three gold medals at the London 2012 Games.

The Olympics are the planet's most illustrious sporting event and offer some great lessons on how to build effective brands:

- ## Strong personal brands contribute to powerful team brands

Consider the Jamaican running team. They are known around the globe as exceptional runners. In fact, such is the consistent performance of Jamaica in athletics that there is an expectation that the country will take home gold medals at every Olympics.

But if you look at the individuals within the team, each athlete has a strong personal brand that contributes to the overall team reputation. Usain Bolt is the obvious example - the man is a sporting icon. But teammate and rival Yohan Blake also has a powerful personal brand. The youngest man to ever break the 10-second barrier, Blake is a two-time World Champion (100m and 4X100m relay) and ended Bolt's three-year reign at the IAAF world championships in Daegu when he beat him by 0.16sec in the 100m finals.

These two men have each achieved much and developed successful personal brands. Being in the same team together contributes to the team's brand. Similarly, the pair benefit from the brand ascribed to the Jamaican running team. It's a win-win situation, in more ways than one.

- ## Reputation management is critical to maintaining a powerful brand

A great example that proves this point is the way Michael Phelps handled the media frenzy that resulted after he was photographed smoking marijuana at a party. He could have denied the truth, reacted in anger, defended his actions or ignored the situation. Instead, he took responsibility, apologised for his actions and demonstrated honesty - a key ingredient in successful personal branding. His humility and careful managing of the situation ensured that the incident was put behind him and hasn't tarnished his reputation as the greatest living Olympian.

- ## Top brands are authentic, distinctive and deliver every time

The example of Michael Phelps above speaks to authenticity. People easily spot fakes, but are drawn to genuine personal brands. This is the same reason that Chad Le Clos' father, Bert Le Clos, became an instant internet sensation following his BBC interview. His genuine emotion and authentic reaction resonated with viewers around the world. People are also attracted to what is different and distinctive.

South African Oscar Pistorius, aka The Blade Runner, fascinates people because he is the first amputee to compete at the able-bodied Olympics. Similarly, Usain Bolt's particular showmanship when he wins a race - striking his lightning bolt pose - sets him apart and makes him memorable. Missy Franklin, the USA teenager who scooped four medals in swimming, three of which were gold, proves how effective brands need to deliver time after time.

Consistency is better than occasional flashes of brilliance. Athletes need to be able to deliver on cue to ensure they qualify in their heats and great brands need to deliver every time in order to keep the special space they occupy in people's minds.

- **The most effective brands are those that put in the effort and make time for marketing**

If nobody is thinking of you, you're invisible. Yes, the Olympic athletes are enormously skilled, but how did they get noticed in the first place?

For many of them, the journey to the Olympics meant making an effort to be noticed and to stand out from their rivals. Even once an athlete gets to Olympic level, there is a chance of being forgotten as more memorable competitors win the attention of viewers. Athletes like Ryan Lochte, the talented USA swimmer, and South Africa's own BMX legend Sifiso Nhlapo, understand the value of marketing and of building their personal brands. Both men have their own websites and are active on Twitter. Lochte has his own fitness video, while Nhlapo (www.skizo105.com) has his own bike brand.

These Olympians understand that while sporting ability gets them to the Olympics, it's their fans that take them beyond the Games.

## ABOUT DONNA RACHELSON

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