

Effective sponsorship shapes the event

As the lead up to 2010 starts to gain momentum, sponsorship will increasingly come into focus as a communications activity. So what are the ingredients of a good sponsorship and what are the approaches that just seem to plod along?

By [Emmet O'Hanlon](#) 5 Sep 2008

The Beijing Olympics are probably a good place to start. As an event of pretty much equal stature to the FIFA World Cup, there should be some good parallels to learn from.

Firstly, there were over 12 major sponsors involved in this year's Olympics, each paying in the region of U\$72 million for the rights alone. I'm sure that most people would struggle to name even half of them outside of the traditional brand names which always seem to crop up - Coca-Cola, Kodak etc. In fact, many people would probably automatically mention Nike which was not a sponsor at all, but given its global stature, people expected it to be. The fact that it also ran an effective low level ambush campaign for which it didn't have to pay rights fees may also have helped.

Building unity

For the most part, sponsors seem to have worked on building unity with the Chinese people. This is the first Olympics to have been staged in the country and numerous research reports have shown that the Chinese were extremely proud to have hosted the event. Also, given the sheer size of the Chinese market, most brands would probably consider their money well spent if they managed to appeal to the hugely populous Chinese nation alone. For instance, Adidas' sponsorship TVC features the Chinese people rallying together to support their athletes.

Other brands such as General Electric, which had a hand in building of all of the different venues for the events, had more low level, traditionalist campaigns, but given that the Chinese government is probably the overall target market, they probably got most of the benefit out of their sponsorship when they signed the deal and were seen to be a team player by the administration.

While the approaches noted above will undoubtedly have had an effect, they don't stand out particularly in terms of innovation or taking sponsorship to another level. But some brands have gone further than this and look set to reap the rewards going forward, with McDonald's being a case in point.

Needed something extra

McDonald's sponsorship of previous Olympic Games and other major sporting events (FIFA) used to work in the more traditional mould with extensive branding of stadia. Ongoing research revealed that this was great for creating awareness, but didn't do much for purchase intention. In fact, in some cases purchase intention actually went down afterwards. The traditional role of sponsorship - creating and building awareness, was working well for the brand. The problem was that it needed something extra.

By the time the FIFA World Cup came around in Germany, McDonald's had time to look at things differently. Instead of targeting awareness, it rather asked how sponsorship could build the brand.

While McDonald's is not a sports brand per se, its positioning as a brand with strong family values clearly accords major importance to children and their development. This is what led to the creation of the 'Player Escort' programme. Very simply, this involves an upfront competition with a sports-related theme designed to suit the specific market. On the day of the game, the lucky winners get to meet the team or athlete, run onto the pitch with them and take part in the pre-match formalities.

Carried obvious risk

Given the frequent negative press coverage that McDonald's gets for its perceived role in promoting poor diet, sports sponsorship carried an obvious risk of backlash. This perhaps explains why engagement with the events themselves was earlier confined to straightforward branding rather than a more in-depth approach as you might have seen from a sports brand.

It sounds like a small thing but think back to when you were a child and what it would have meant to stand on the pitch with the Springbok team or another of your sporting heroes before they went into action. For most children it is one of their greatest dreams come true and delivers a strong feel-good factor to their parents as well.

In this day and age, many sponsors would have been put off by the risks and logistics involved in conceiving and safely orchestrating such an event. Now, just about any brand with a family element in its makeup would die to own the programme, given the positive PR and knock on effects it has generated ('purchase intention' sees significant rises when the Player Escort programme has run). Furthermore, because it is a sole and exclusive right, it cannot be copied.

So what can we take out of this? Clearly sponsorship should be treated as a flexible medium which can and should be adapted to the objectives set out for building the brand. Moving outside of the traditional parameters is not going to be easy, especially where event organisers also have to come to the party but, McDonald's has demonstrated, the rewards for breaking new ground are potentially huge.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ermet O'Hanlon is strategic director of DDB South Africa, based in Johannesburg. He came to the country five years ago as part of a turnaround team with CEO Glen Lomas. Before this, he worked at BBH and DDB London, developing sponsorship campaigns for Budweiser's partnership with the FIFA World Cup, amongst others.

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