

The four fronts of the upcoming Olympic brand battle

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This summer, while athletes from around the world compete for gold medals and nations vie for bragging rights, a second Olympic event will be taking place. Brands will be racing to win the hearts and minds of the world’s consumers, and ultimately *their* gold. This coming-out party for the world’s most populous country is expected to break records in attendance, viewership, and marketing revenues. Let the 2008 Olympic Brand Games begin!

Having trained several years for this once-in-a-lifetime event, more than 33 official sponsors and 30 official suppliers have started flexing their brand biceps in preparation for the big sprint. Most feel a little doped by the millions they shelled out for the right to be an official global sponsor (as much as \$100 million) or the right to advertise within China (“just” \$50 million). They nervously wait, hoping their preparations will pay off.

But Olympic sponsors will have some tough hurdles to jump. Not only will they be racing against each other (there are three official Olympic beers alone!), but they will also have to face an unruly band of Chinese and international brands scheming to grab their own share of attention. Led by ambush marketing leader, Nike, these brands will engage in guerilla brand warfare to win consumer gold without paying top Olympic sponsorship dollars.

The Beijing Olympics promises to be one of the most hotly contested brand battles in recent history, and we anticipate that the competition between official sponsors and ambush marketers will be particularly fierce. As observers of this historic battle, what tactics can we expect to see from ambush marketers? Where will they strike? How will they play for consumer affection? And which brands will win the coveted consumers’ gold?

FOUR BATTLE FRONTS

The history of the Olympics’ relationship with marketing is effectively a hundred-year cat-and-mouse game between organizers and marketers. Advertising in Olympic venues was once allowed and then banned. (The first live Olympic television broadcast was disrupted when the final torchbearer tripped and fell over a TV cable on the stadium floor during the opening ceremony.)

	PLAN	TRAVEL	ATTEND
Official Sponsor’s DREAM	Fly Air China to Beijing	Book hotel room with a Visa card	Quench thirst with Coke in Adidas outfits
Official Sponsor’s NIGHTMARE	Fly S7 to Beijing	Find apartment share on CouchSurfers.com	Smuggle in a (red) Pepsi can

Hundreds of sponsorship and merchandising agreements were signed (including the Olympics' own cigarette brand, called Olympia) and then consolidated in 1985 under the management of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and The Olympic Partner (TOP) program. Today, all sponsorship activity is managed by TOP, which holds exclusive marketing rights to both winter and summer Games. There are four key fronts along which brands can officially—or unofficially—launch their attacks. And this is where we'll be watching the battle unfold.

- **Athletes:** Individual athletes, sport-specific squads, national teams
- **Olympic venues:** Spectator stands at places of competition and their immediate surroundings
- **The street:** The streets and squares of Beijing and cities around the world into which euphoric celebrations will spill
- **Media environment:** Traditional broadcast media and, for the first time in Olympic history, a critical mass of people following new digital media

ATHLETES: PERFORMANCE TRUMPS POMP

TOP permits official sponsors of the Olympic Games to provide clothing for athletes during official ceremonies. But brands that sponsor national teams or individual athletes have the privilege of supplying uniforms to athletes for their competitions, which gives them prime-time visibility during the most memorable Olympic moments.

Watching the awards ceremony is certainly very moving, but witnessing the athletes' moments of victory and the fight to get there is simply more exciting—and more memorable. Demonstrations of incredible human performance and strength of spirit are the moments

that people remember long after the Games are over.

They are also the moments that the media replays time and time again. We need look no further for an example of this than the 1996 Atlanta Games. During a press conference preceding the finals of the 100-meter dash, Linford Christie famously appeared wearing contact lenses embossed with the Puma logo. Media around the world covered it and official Olympic sponsor Reebok was powerless to prevent it. And we're still talking about it.

Although Adidas is the official TOP sponsor for the 2008 Olympic Games, 22 of China's 28 teams will be wearing Nike during their athletic performances. The images broadcast around the world and preserved for eternity—of athletes sweating, competing, and winning—will feature Nike.

The athletes will only change into their Adidas gear just before they climb the steps to the awards podium. Ambush marketers, such as Nike, will reap the rewards of this situation. Their brands will be prominently displayed during the competition and interviews. Even if their sponsored athletes lose, Nike will be able to tell compelling stories about them.

This is just one example of the tactics that ambush marketers will attempt in Beijing as they compete with official sponsors for visibility and consumer favor. There are sure to be others.

What to look for...

- Sponsorship of athletic underdogs and media coverage of their personal, moving stories
- Sponsorship of athletes' dedicated mothers and fathers, who gave their love and sacrificed to help their children achieve their dreams
- Expression of political views by a high-profile athlete (which will saddle official sponsors with a

WATCH	CELEBRATE	REMEMBER
See athletes parade	Drink Budweiser at a bar	Share Olympic snapshots on Kodak Gallery
Admire the Li Ning-clad commentator on TV	Attend private Grey Goose party to celebrate the first French gold medal	Run Nike's Human Race to re-live the competition

crisis similar to Dior's scramble after Sharon Stone's remark about the karmic cause of the Szechuan earthquake)

- Real-time reaction to the action, such as Nike's microsite for Chinese hurdler Liu Xiang just hours after his unexpected gold medal in Athens, 2004

VENUES: CIRCUMVENTING THE CRACKDOWN

During the Los Angeles Olympic Games in 1984, Nike surrounded stadiums with murals promoting its brand and products. Scarred by such stunts, the IOC has cracked down on guerilla marketing in the vicinity of Olympic venues. The Beijing Olympics Organizing Committee has declared war on ambush marketing and will go so far as to ban fans from bringing outside drinks into Olympic venues, thus giving a nod to official sponsor Coca-Cola.

The Organizing Committee for the London 2012 Games is already buying up outdoor advertising space within a buffer zone around key venues, to give right of first refusal to official sponsors. But however hard the organizers try to create "brand clean-zones" for Olympic venues, there is no doubt that brands and their agencies will find a way into—or around—the places they want to be seen.

Just think of some recent examples. Guinness flew a branded balloon, tethered to a tree stump in a private garden, over the final of the Heineken Cup rugby tournament in Dublin. Dutch brewer Bavaria gave away orange Bavaria-branded lederhosen to several hundred Dutch supporters at the 2006 football World Cup in Germany. Because Budweiser was the official beer sponsor of the World Cup, stewards

Landor Brand Olympics Live Blog

Unconventional marketing, unconventional coverage

As Americans have long known, the marketing content surrounding the Super Bowl can overtake the sports content as the main event. For better or worse, the Olympics is reaching a similar stage.

The brand battle is likely to be fascinating and unconventional, so an unconventional approach is needed to do justice to the coverage. Landor will feature live commentary from a team of branding experts from around the world, including people on the ground in Beijing, at landor.com/olympics. See you on 08.08.08!

ordered fans to remove the lederhosen before letting them in... in their underwear!

What tricks will ambush marketers use to intrude into official Olympic venues and brand-clean zones?

What to look for...

- Companies conspiring with fans to smuggle branded gear into official Olympic venues to be brought out *en masse* at the stroke of an SMS signal
- Branded collateral floating above the skyline or into television camera frames (perhaps blueprints of venues and camera locations were obtained from bribed venue operators)
- Branded knickers... the prospect is not far fetched

BRINGING THE GAMES TO THE PEOPLE

While the Olympics are a universally accessible symbol of the human spirit, the actual event itself remains far more exclusive. It is for the privileged few who either have the muscle to compete or the money to buy tickets.

An experience, and the emotions it evokes, can be more powerful than a thousand images. Ambush marketers will try to create inclusive, community-building grass-roots movements or events, inserting themselves either overtly or covertly into these real experiences by putting their products on the feet or in the mouths of participants.

By doing so, they will steal much of the limelight from official sponsors. Events can stimulate the growth of a category and may do more to establish longer-lasting bonds with consumers than flashing logos during the Olympic medal ceremony ever can.

Nike is trying to sign up one million people around the world to participate in their Human Race—10k races in more than 25 cities. Not coincidentally, this race will take place exactly one week after the Olympics' closing ceremonies. This event is clearly designed to be associated with the global spirit of the competition of the Olympics, and it can be expected that Nike will leverage it to the fullest before, during, and after the Olympic Games. By doing so, Nike will ride on the wave of positive feelings that the Olympics will evoke with consumers around the world.

How else will ambush marketers try to bring the Games to the masses in Beijing?

What to look for...

- Athletic events on the streets of Beijing that compete with the official Games, such as mass marathons or street tournaments

- Nonathletic, but nonetheless Olympic-themed events, such as the Great Shopping Mall Dash, long-distance SMS marathon, or Great Dumpling Munch
- Branded symbols and shapes used as decorative but mnemonic patterns plastered across public spaces where people gather to watch their nations' athletes compete

MEDIA ENVIRONMENT: LAND OF CONFUSION

Over 20 years ago, companies realized that they didn't need to pay top dollar to sponsor the Olympics itself when they could insert their brand at the meta-level by sponsoring the channels that broadcast the event. Kodak sponsored ABC's coverage of the 1984 Los Angeles Games, where Fuji was an official sponsor. Fuji returned the favor during the Seoul Games in 1988, and we see the same tactics being used today.

This year, the main battleground will be CCTV-5, China's live sports channel, now known as "the Olympic channel." It will broadcast the entire event. Li Ning, China's largest athletic-wear producer, will not be an official Olympic sponsor, but it signed an agreement with CCTV, guaranteeing that CCTV's Olympic anchors will wear Li Ning clothing or badges during all broadcasts. By inserting its brand into the official storytelling of the Olympics, Li Ning stands to gain a clear association to the Olympics without being a TOP sponsor.

The newest, and perhaps most interesting, front of the upcoming brand battle will be digital media and user-generated content. The Beijing 2008 Olympics will be the first YouTube Olympics, with fans from around the world armed with mobile phones, cameras, and, if the Chinese government keeps its promises, unfettered access to blogs and social networks throughout the events. The Beijing Games mark the first time the IOC has sold digital media rights to broadcasters, but nobody is really sure how this one will play out. There simply aren't any precedents.

In the run-up to the Games, Pepsi has already used mass-user-generated content by engaging 160 million customers online with an open-source can-design competition. Winning entries will be printed on cans supporting Team China. Oh, they also switched the color of their cans from blue to red, officially to signal support for China's red flag, but perhaps unofficially to look strikingly like the official TOP sponsor, Coca-Cola.

How will ambush marketers try to dominate the cyberspace of the Olympics?

What to look for...

- Companies or political activists conspiring with athletes to sneak hidden messages (with symbolic words or hand gestures) into highly publicized press conferences; these would escape the real-time filters of Olympic censorship and could be exploited widely on YouTube
- Brand-sponsored sports events or team clubs on digital venues, such as Facebook, or Second Life
- Blogs, by athletes or teams, gaining a strong following with personal, intimate, in-depth coverage of the Games that mass media simply can't replicate
- Consumers turning to content aggregators, such as Google News, rather than official media partners as their first stop for Olympic coverage

Will the Olympic Games become a nightmare for official sponsors?

We can't know for certain who will win the race for consumer gold. But we do know there are plenty of opportunities for ambush marketers to generate attention for themselves along the four fronts outlined here.

Ambush marketers will also have plenty of opportunities to exploit the weaknesses and restrictions placed on official sponsors, and will try to find ways to insert their brands into the grand experience of the Olympics either overtly or covertly.

They can "win by association," tapping into the goodwill generated by the Olympics, or "win by intrusion," capturing momentary attention that has the potential to spread virally.

Their hope is to link their brand to people's memories and stories of the Olympics, which will be shared and remembered long after the Games are over. ■



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