

Brands miss Olympics buzz

Pride, excitement, frustration social engagement:

brands need to work harder to capture the cultural zeitgeist of 2012 and demonstrate more emotional awareness in the run up to the Olympics. This is what consumers told Platform and Promise, a leading co-creation consultancy.

Despite the ticketing disappointments of London 2012, the magic of the Olympics is difficult to destroy. Londoners especially are proud that the spotlight will be on them, and there is a sense that Britain has “already won” in being the host. However, there is also scepticism: the sense that the Games have corrupted their spirit in the quest for money.

The actions of the larger sponsors have done little to counter this feeling as yet. Many are perceived as being lazy – publicising the 2012 logo widely, yet not helping people taste or get a ‘trailer’ of the excitement that is yet to come.

Some brands are showing promise. The emotional pull of Visa’s TV commercial is skilful. British Airways’ ‘They Will Fly’ campaign touches an emotional, aspirational nerve; and at least links the Olympics to what the brand itself actually sells. Not so though Lloyds TSB – which is doing well in terms of Games awareness by putting the rings on the back of ATM receipts, but whom consumers find difficult to link with the Games in any meaningful way. BMW has cleverly bridged this gap by linking its precision engineering message with that of the finely tuned training of athletes on its Olympics

mini-site. Here you can follow the training regimes of famous names like Rebecca Adlington, if you know it’s there.

But where are the sponsors – or indeed, other brands – telling us what we’re going to get out of the event, and all that surrounds it?

The Olympics are not just about sport. Indeed, seeing as most people didn’t get tickets, for many it won’t be about sport at all. Here in the UK, the party to end all parties is being thrown – and as yet we are missing the glittering hostess. Consumers feel that no-one is taking responsibility for making sure they have fun over the Olympic period. Even awareness of local councils’ budgets for festivities is disappointingly low.

We believe in the ability – and necessity – of using everyday people (consumers) to help solve businesses challenges. So it was to a group of eight Londoners that we put the question, “What would you do if you were in charge of an Olympics campaign?”

Interestingly, the creations were overwhelmingly anti-‘big brand’, with our consumers envisaging solutions for smaller, ethical initiatives featuring local food produce; or British brands that

have a more obvious connection to sport, or consumers could see being useful during the Games, such as Buxton water. Such idealism indicates that large brands are being perceived as intruders, with little direct relevance to a major sporting event, and audiences find it difficult to justify them having the Olympic logo on their billboards.

Blockbuster sponsorship of the likes of McDonald’s and Coca-Cola was eventually understood by consumers, when pushed. What they needed was an explanation of how brands are helping: reassurance that large amounts of money are being spent isn’t enough. When cynicism is rife, transparency – and proof that sponsorship makes a difference – is a hygiene factor for communications.

For many, the Games will be fantasy football crossed with a Eurovision party: a few stats, plenty of flags, and even more drinks. There’s a more obvious role for big brands here, like Cadbury’s. But where are the other light-hearted, sociable campaigns like theirs? Vibrant and inventive brands should offer more ways to engage.

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What should brands be doing?

1 Mirror people's feelings. Capitalise on the high emotions of carnival chaos – the world being turned on its head – and the frustrations and excitement that ensue. Brands that empathise with what real people will be doing (in the pub, in the park, in the unusually heavy traffic) will come across as connected and human. Pride is still also currently under-leveraged: whether patriotic or not, Britain is coming together next year and no-one is celebrating this.

2 Make an explicit link to what your brand does for the Olympics, in its widest sense (i.e. the festivities and the country, as well as the Games themselves).

People struggle to figure out what the benefit is to local communities or to them personally: there is a general feeling that it will be good, but when pressed, no-one knows why. Let people know you will still be there even when the spotlight goes off in 2013.

3 Entertain the Olympic underbelly. What will you do for those who will be skiving off work, partaking in office sweepstakes, hanging out at the grounds without tickets, or even who will be leaving the country and sub-letting out their London pads? (Remember the phenomenon of the Royal Wedding getaway?) Get involved in other spaces where people can watch the Games in their local communities. And don't forget the 'anti-theme'. Perhaps not one for sponsors, but a 'just good enough' or 'couch potato' message could work well, and achieve cut-through in a sports-saturated marketplace.

4 Spot the 'moment' and actions of the country and react quickly. Few brands maximised the cultural capital of the vuvuzela at the South African World Cup as well as they should have. Likewise the stories that are most recalled about Olympic Games are human and emerge at the last minute: think 'Eric the Eel' from Sydney 2000, the Equatoguinean competitor who learnt to swim just eight months before the Games.

5 Go viral. The worlds' first truly digital Olympics has so far proved disappointing in this field. Create content which can be shared, contributed to and owned by users on different platforms to get your brand out there. It can be naughty and fast – both ideal for capturing the mood and people's attention.