

Olympic ambush

Social media offers a new channel for ambush marketing at the 2012 Olympic Games in London, and the organisers can do little to prevent it, it seems

By Tony Meenaghan, *University College Dublin*

The prospect of a major sports event fills fans with a sense of anticipation and expectation. For sports and sponsorship marketers, there is the additional sense of anticipation regarding the likelihood of an ambush and the 'cat and mouse' games so often played out at major global sports events. For some third parties, ambush activity has itself become a spectator sport.

Thus it is with the 2012 London Olympic Games which are nearly upon us. So how is the sideshow unfolding on this occasion and what is new or different this time?

The 2012 Games are likely to see a huge rise in social media usage around the Games and have potentially significant implications for sponsorship. But before looking at

ambush marketing in the new media environment, it is perhaps instructive to examine the phenomenon and the strategies that have been deployed as the practice has evolved.

In a *Sloan Management Review* paper, I defined ambush marketing as: 'The practice whereby another company, often a competitor, intrudes upon public attention surrounding the event, thereby deflecting attention to themselves and away from the sponsor'.

This definition captures the essence of ambush activity in that the attention of media and consumers is deflected towards the ambusher, with consequent beneficial effects in terms of implied event involvement, media publicity and, perhaps, image association. This deflection, by definition, has negative consequences for the official sponsor who has paid for rights which are appropriated by an ambusher who is either freeloading or paying very much less for event association.

The use of the descriptor 'ambush marketing' is highly pejorative, with emotive terms such as 'theft' and 'parasitic' being frequently used to label ambush transgressions. However, not all ambush activity is the same in approach or outcome. Many suggested instances of 'ambushing' are in fact quite legal; some deliberately exploit loopholes in the structure of rights around major events, or amount to an exaggeration of a brand's status and event affiliation; others again amount to no more than 'party-pooping' behaviour by competitors.



AMBUSH MARKETING STRATEGIES

1 Sponsor media coverage of the event

Use of this strategy led to the celebrated Fuji versus Kodak case at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games. Fuji was the worldwide Olympic Partner (TOP) sponsor, yet Kodak became the sponsor of the ABC Television broadcast of the Games (as well as official film supplier of the US track and field team). Neither aspect of Kodak's approach was actually illegal. With regard to the broadcast sponsorship, most major rights holders now have agreements in place with broadcasters to protect major sponsors from being ambushed in this way. However, the challenge posed by the emergence of 'new media' for rights holders and official sponsors is increasingly significant



2 Sponsor a sub-category within the event and exploit aggressively

Given the pyramid-like structure of rights surrounding a major event, a common ambush strategy is to seek sponsorship association at a lower level (and cost) and promote this involvement in a significant way. This lesser financial commitment enables the ambusher to potentially outspend their official sponsoring rival in terms of activation. Rights holders at lower levels on the pyramid are largely free to operate autonomously and independently.

The case of the 2010 South African World Cup where both Coca-Cola and Adidas were major sponsors is illustrative. During this sports event, rivals Pepsi and Nike used international soccer players (a lower level association) in soccer 'themed' advertising to promote their brands. Indeed Nike's

much-awarded advertising campaign 'Write the Future' from that World Cup represents a benchmark for sports advertising.

3 Engage in concurrent advertising around the event

Engaging in advertising ('themed' or traditional) which runs parallel to a major sports event is a frequently used strategy for ambush. 'Themed' advertising suggests association with an event without the payment of rights fees to the event rights holder. The use of individual players and event-related advertising themes as instanced above is one such mechanism. The use of specific sporting emblems, images or paraphernalia, such as skiing gear and snow, can, for example, imply association with winter sports. As long as no protected images or emblems are involved, this latter

activity is legal if perhaps likely to be seen as somewhat 'sneaky'. The use of traditional advertising (not themed) by a rival running concurrently with an actual sponsor's campaign can also be construed as 'ambushing', but is not illegal, even though some might see such a strategy as 'spoiling'. Conversely, allowing one's competitor a 'free run' is also likely to draw criticism for failure to compete.

4 Miscellaneous ambush strategies

This includes a variety of ambush tactics, which range from the predictable to the ultra-creative. Promotions (trips, tickets, etc.) and the use of 'congratulatory' or 'well wishes' advertising, have long been mechanisms to suggest an event association, as have unofficial 'on-site' and 'near venue' activities. However, sports rights holders now actively protect against such ambush activities. Protection against ambush at the creative end of the spectrum can be more challenging. Examples include Linford Christie's wearing of a contact lens with the Puma logo at the 1996 Olympics, or Fosters' association with the 1991 Rugby World Cup (when Steinlager was the official sponsor) through its ad campaign using the 'Swing Low Sweet Carry Out' take on England's rugby anthem *Swing Low Sweet Chariot*.

In discussing ambush marketing, it is useful to distinguish between stunt and strategy. The term stunt, meaning 'something spectacular or unusual to gain publicity', covers many instances of ambushing, such as the Dutch beer brand, Bavaria, at the 2010 South African World Cup, Hunky Dory's Crisps and Irish Rugby or Paddy Power's signage ambush at the Cheltenham Horse Racing Festival in 2010.

Their beneficial effects are largely in terms of immediate publicity, and any brand values garnered tend to be 'stunt-related', rather than arising from the inherent values of the ambushed event. From the perspective of the rights holder, such 'stunts' divert media coverage away from the event and its legitimate sponsors. For a sponsor who is ambushed, the result is a dilution of market consciousness. More strategic ambushing will develop a longer-term connection with selected sports events. The aforementioned examples of Nike and Pepsi fit into this strategic category.

The marketing landscape is being transformed by the increasing pervasiveness of social media, and the impact on ambush marketing is profound. The scale of the transformation is indicated by the fact that, at the time of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, there were an estimated 100 million users of social media worldwide. As we approach the 2012 London Olympic Games, that figure is estimated at more than two billion users worldwide. For major sports events, social media represent a 'double-edged sword'.

On the positive side, sports rights holders and sponsors have been quick to embrace new technologies and new media to communicate and connect with fans and their passions. The interactive, real-time features of social media enable inter-fan conversations as well as athlete-fan interactions (e.g. the IOC-created Olympic Athlete Hub), all of which further serve to provide heightened engagement experiences for the sport, sponsors and fans. But new media provide many challenges for sports rights holders, both in sponsorship and in broader management terms. Among others, these include the struggle for the control of images and conversations in a connected world.

The new media landscape, some controlled by owners such as Facebook and Twitter and others under the influence of individual bloggers, poses a significant ambush marketing challenge. In an era of exclusively traditional media, the ability to place advertising executions around sports programmes, or to sponsor the broadcast of the actual sports event, enabled ambush activity, a loophole now largely closed off through agreement between broadcasters and sports rights holders.

The move from traditional to new media has, however, created a fragmented and diverse range of media opportunities, which at this point in time are largely uncontrolled in relation to ambush. Such media are difficult to regulate and to-date only two owners in this space, Twitter and Foursquare, appear to have agreed to co-operate with the upcoming London Olympics.

Some recent results give considerable cause for concern on the ambush front. UK social media research undertaken by

BrandWatch in February 2012 showed Nike dominating conversations on the internet, with 7.7% of the Olympics-related conversations associated with the Nike brand.

By contrast, Adidas was associated with only 0.49% of such conversations. Adidas is a London 2012 Olympic Partner at a reported overall cost of \$100 million. Nike, which has redirected much of its general marketing budget to social media, is also associated with the London Olympics, but through the sponsorship of individual athletes such as world champion cyclist Mark Cavendish and runner Paula Radcliffe.

These athletes appear in the current Nike 'Make it Count' billboard ad campaign and feature the athletes' Twitter account names and references to their hashtag as @makeitcount. This campaign directly links to the marketing and advertising of Nike's movement-measurement product, the Fuelband. Global television advertising for the Fuelband campaign with its 'Make it Count' slogan, involves a strong sports theme and has been running since early 2012.

Nike further underlined its generic sporting credentials, with the launch of its programme of product innovations (Nike Pro Turbo speed track uniform and Nike Zoom spikes, etc.) in February 2012 where the MC for the launch was Carl Lewis, the winner of ten Olympic gold medals. Nike's US Olympic strategy is heavily focused on swimming and track and field events, which are two of the three Olympic sports most watched by Americans. Its strategy again is to sponsor key US stars and Nike is the official sponsor



London 2012

of the US National Track Team. Collectively, Nike's concentration of activities and their timing has ensured its prominence across major markets at a key sporting juncture.

Recent research (May 2012) by the US-based Global Language Monitor (GLM), an internet media analytics company which has been tracking ambush activity since the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, points to the potential and threat posed by new media. GLM measured the strength of the brand affiliation for each official Olympic sponsor against those of their primary non-affiliated competitors. Their most recent report indicates that 'non-affiliated marketers' took 27 of the top 50 spots measuring effective brand activation by the Global Language Monitor's Brand Affiliation Index.

Selected top-line results from their most recent report (May 2012) are as follows:

- McDonald's is in a tough fight, ranking behind Subway and Pizza Hut, but beating KFC.
- Ambusher Nike leads Partner Adidas by a wide margin.
- Procter & Gamble continues to crush ambush competitors as it did in Vancouver.
- Ambusher Ericsson is winning over Supporter Cisco by a 3:1 margin.

Both the UK-based BrandWatch and the above GLM research are conducted in the new media space. While research results, by their nature, capture particular moments in time, these studies clearly indicate that the evolving media environment represents a new 'front' in the 'game playing' that is ambush marketing.

As the now dubbed 'Social Olympics' unfold, the comments of the founder of the Global Language Monitor outline the challenge: "The Olympic movement is not immune to the historic shifts in communications affecting all institutions worldwide. The seemingly all-pervasive media ensure that the flow of information can be stopped neither by national boundaries nor institutional gatekeepers. There is no reason to think that marketing activities are immune from such forces. In fact, marketing has been one of the foremost purveyors of new media technology."