(SP) INFORMATION, INNOVATION OR STAGNATION: MEGA SPORT EVENT WEBSITES

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Introduction

Many contemporary mega sport events now rely on their official website as their primary interface with a range of audiences, from the general sporting public to officials, sponsors and other stakeholders. Not only does the event's site need to have varied and specific information for many its different audiences and purposes, but there are expectations that it will be innovative and creative.

Throughout its lifecycle the official website has multiple roles and functions. Just as the organizing committee's focus changes, so too does its website's. For example, at various times it acts as: an online shop for tickets and merchandise; a guide to the event; a directory for services, such as transport; a description of the rules of the competition; a source of biographies of athletes; and a news and result service. From a pre-event beginning of several hundreds of pages of often static text, it morphs into an interactive site, often with thousands of pages and real time updates during the event. Increasingly, there is a convergence of technologies, as live video feeds, webcams and multiple views become expected by end users. At all stages, from an information perspective, the website of a mega sporting event requires material which is accurate, timely, appropriate and authoritative.

There is also a growing recognition of the commercial value of the site as ecommerce is increasingly dominating ticket and merchandise sales. Additionally, post the event, the site may be archived. This becomes part of the event's information legacy: a valuable reference source for sport information, transfer of know-how, and historical research.

Method

This paper explores mega sport event websites using examples from the Olympic Games (Sydney 2000, Athens 2004, Torino 2006, and Beijing 2008) and the Commonwealth Games (Manchester 2002, Melbourne 2006). Until recently, limited research has been conducted on how large sporting events develop, manage and structure the content on their websites (Halbwirth, Johansen and Toohey, 2005).

A content analysis of the events' home pages (collected at different stages of each organization's life span) was conducted. The data was coded, verified and analyzed in themes of: content; look and feel; and functionality (adopted from Small (1997)). The home pages were examined on these criteria at each iterative stage of the event to provide longitudinal data, using a 5 point rating scale (from very poor to excellent). This enabled the researchers to explore how the sites changed in accordance with the planning, implementation or legacy phase of the events.

Results

The results showed that at various stages of the event's lifecycle the sites reflected the changing priorities and needs of the event organizers. What was common to all sites was the ongoing challenge of managing and structuring the enormous amount of content being posted on their websites. 'Content is king' is a well-known aphorism (Huizingh, 1999). There were variances between sites based on ease of accessing specific information and how each provided orientation to the user.

However, despite advancements in technology and design, the most current sites do not evidence substantive innovations in the forms of the information presented. Content and its display have become formulaic.

Discussion

In a world where events are characterized by growing complexity in both their internal and external environments, websites are a vital communication and information channel. Effective content management can allow event organizers to increase their operational effectiveness, mitigate risk and streamline communication with their stakeholders. Yet, there is not a great deal of content difference from the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games site onwards, even though six years have elapsed. This raises a question which event organizers need to consider: are the constraints of Sydney's "best practice" stifling creative advancement? What can be done from a content perspective as well as a 'look' or technical perspective to provide uniqueness and originality to differentiate the branding of future mega sport events?

References

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