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Ambush Marketing: Issues and Strategies in Vancouver 2010

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AMBUSH MARKETING: ISSUES AND STRATEGIES AT VANCOUVER 2010

Background and Objectives

As Olympic sponsorship has become a major commercial enterprise, providing the Olympic Movement with revenue of \$ 2.4 billion (IOC, 2010) from domestic and TOP sponsorship in the current quadrennial, ambush marketing has followed to become a key strategy for ambushes and a key concern for organizers. As a result, fighting and preventing ambush marketing, both from a business perspective (e.g., Séguin & O'Reilly, 2008) and a legal perspective (e.g., McKelvey & Grady, 2008), has become a major theme in the literature. Specifically, in the lead up to the Games, questions were raised in the media (e.g., Geist, 2007) and academia (e.g., Ellis, Scassa, Séguin & Parent, 2008) about the creation of legislation entitled *Olympic and Paralympic Marks Act* (OPMA). Following the 2010 Winter Olympic Games in Vancouver a look back at the issues and strategies related to the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and Vancouver Organizing Committee's (VANOC) fight against ambush marketing can offer vital information going forward. The purpose of this research is to examine the state of ambush marketing in Vancouver during the 2010 Winter Olympic Games. More, specifically, it will examine the ambush strategies and issues which arose and how they were dealt with, as well as re-assess the questions which need to be asked in relation to anti-ambush marketing legislation.

Methodology

This research used semi-structured interviews (VANOC, IOC, COC), archival material and direct observations, before, during, and after the Games, both in Vancouver and using television and newspaper reports. During observation data was recorded through daily memo-taking and later transcribed. All data was analyzed using content analysis. It was coded using emergent themes relating to identifying and describing ambush marketing, in addition to general brand protection, legislation (OPMA), ambush marketing tactics and developing issues.

Results/Discussion

Results showed two key interesting strategies and issues which arose during the Games. The first was a result of the overwhelming patriotic sentiments which accompanied the Games. The themes "Go Canada Go" and "Welcoming the World" were expressed in every store window. While this helped create the atmosphere that surrounded the Games, it added another element of confusion to the already complex discussion of what exactly constitutes ambush marketing and how to fight against it without suffering a negative backlash. The second key

strategy which was recognized was the promotion of Canadian National Sport Organization (NSO) sponsors and National Olympic Committee (NOC) sponsors. During the period between Olympic Games funding is needed to keep programs and operations within these organizations afloat. It is the need for additional sponsorship money, outside of what is provided by the Olympic Movement which complicates the issue of ambush marketing during an Olympic year with NOCs and NSOs wanting to support those organizations that have helped provide funding.

While various strategies were used in dealing with ambush marketing, specifically education, legislation, and naming and shaming ambushers, the key finding in this area was that the value of OPMA seemed to lie in its role as a deterrent. While large businesses can afford lawyers to ensure they are not breaking the law, smaller businesses, with little understanding and fewer resources, were arguably more constrained by the threat of legal action they would have little chance of finding the funds to fight. This means that in most cases, nothing more than a cease and desist order, or the threat of such measures would be enough to stop a would-be ambusher.

In looking to reassess the questions that must be asked in relation to anti-ambush legislation there are two clear issues to be addressed. The first questions the classification of ambush marketing as a legal issue requiring legislation as opposed to the business issue it is argued to be. The second considers the consequences, from a legal standpoint, of converting ambush marketing into a legal issue. This enters the ambush marketing within a legal and constitutional framework that may have ramifications for how the issue is approached and addressed. It also sets strict boundaries about legitimate and illegitimate conduct. Both of these outcomes may, in fact, make it more difficult to fight against the practice in the long term.

References

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