

OLYMPIC AMBUSH MARKETING AND NEW MEDIA

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Abstract

Aim of the paper

Sport consumers continue to embrace new ways to interact with global sporting events, such as through social media sites and using mobile technology. Simultaneously, the Olympic media environment and resulting sponsorship opportunities are also changing rapidly. During the Beijing Olympic Games, for example, 15 percent of viewers used mobile devices to watch the Games. Just 18 months later, as mobile usage became more mainstream, that number rose to 27 percent in Vancouver (Kaplan, 2010). The Vancouver Olympics also experienced phenomenal growth with 1.2 million app users (Kaplan, 2010). This paper uses examples of marketing campaigns from the 2010 Vancouver Games and upcoming 2012 London Games to discuss the legal challenges and sponsorship opportunities resulting from increased uses of new media, specifically mobile technology. The paper also analyzes the impact of new media on the practice of ambush marketing. New media presents a "unique platform for promotion" that "offers direct access to, and interaction with, consumers" (Séguin, 2010). Through discussion of the legal and sport marketing issues, a balanced perspective informed by scholarly and industry sources will shed light on the role of new media in Olympic sponsorship protection.

Description of the practice

The practice of using new media (i.e., the amalgamation of social media, computer-enabled consumer devices and the Internet, as well as traditional media) as a vehicle for ambush marketing poses an increasing area of concern for organizers and sponsors of global sporting events. Current ambush tactics seem resilient to well-established brand protection strategies (Grady & Bernthal, 2011). This is due, in part, to the convergence of technological advancements, shifting cultural norms in people's communication preferences, and blurring the lines between online and

mobile content with regard to how fans access content generated by and around global sporting events. As a result, "the brand protection issues that sponsors and sports properties must now protect against are changing" and "as fan bases go digital, not enough brands are adjusting to the new challenges" (CMO Council, 2010, p. 1). In fact, a recent survey of sport marketers revealed that 25% do not have a brand protection plan in place for digital media ambushes (CMO Council, 2010).

A confounding factor is that a majority of ambush marketing incidents skirt the legal restrictions by avoiding use of the event's registered trademarks. While most ambush marketing activity is not technically illegal, the potential impact on the sponsorship environment can be substantial. For example, while VANOC reported less ambush activity than at previous Olympics, Canada's Olympic protection legislation had little effect in stopping high-profile ambush incidents. Research by Séguin (2010) revealed that Canadian National Olympic Partners were seemingly split over the value of the special legislation with most value seen as a deterrent to ambush activity rather than a remedy.

As Olympic sponsors search for new ways to utilize technology to forge deeper connections with consumers, they must ensure that their objectives are strategically blended within the sponsor's brand (Séguin, 2010). "The future of the Olympic movement will depend on online and mobile audiences, and how well organizers and sponsors learn to use those media" ("Brands preparing," 2011, p. 1). Creative participation of contributors, interactive user feedback, the creation of user-generated content, and community formation around exclusive media content provide novel applications to enhance existing Olympic sponsorship relationships.

Implications and Learning

Numerous opportunities exist to integrate the use of mobile technology into sponsorship activation plans at global sporting events. The challenge for sport marketers, particularly with regard to ambush marketing, is understanding how the on-demand nature of mobile technology can help break through the cluttered sponsorship environment (Séguin, 2010). While mobile technology provides a promising avenue to better activation, success in using this technology also requires getting ahead of the technology curve as mobile applications advance and sport consumers rely on popular social media sites, mobile media, and traditional media sources. Furthermore, as event organizers seek to own the conversation surrounding the event, sponsors must find new ways to creatively engaging with their audience so that the potential for and value of ambush activity is minimized.

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