

How brands can activate at the Olympics, without the event ever taking place

Published May 2020

With many countries across the world being in various states of lockdown, April 15th passed like most other days during this period. Ordinarily it would have been covered as the 100-day mark before the Opening Ceremony for Tokyo 2020, but on this occasion no reference was made. In addition to the International Olympic Committee (IOC) marking this milestone in our calendars, Olympic partners have often capitalized on conversation around the day to launch their Global Olympic marketing programmes. With other milestones looming for the now-postponed global sports events such as UEFA European Championships first match (June 12th) and Olympic Day (June 23rd), we are moving into unprecedented territory with event partners considering whether to activate their association with these properties, without the events actually taking place.

With this challenge facing brands, we started by reviewing the Olympic activities to date. The vast majority of The Olympic Partners (TOPs) responded quickly to the announcement of the postponement of Tokyo 2020 aligning with each other in tone. Samsung responded with a statement supporting the decision: “We will continue to work closely with the IOC and Games organisers to ensure a safe and memorable Olympic Games. We remain fully committed to supporting the Olympic Movement globally.”

Some partners have also generated notable coverage by communicating their commitment to Athletes contracted to feature in the 2020 Games. As an example, VISA have announced all 90+ athlete partnerships are being extended into 2021. This is a statement which has been further supported by their 'Do your part like an Olympian' campaign. Designed to showcase Team VISA athletes performing the difficult sporting feats in the comfort of their own home, the campaign also promoted a Covid-19-related safety message of using hand sanitizer. The pivot to a purpose driven message was made at the last minute with production close to completion, but VISA managed to roll out a relevant and entertaining campaign at a time when it was particularly needed.

Looking forward to the summer months, the impact of Covid-19 will influence brands decision making around activating Olympics campaigns in two ways. Either, as in the case of Airbnb and Coca-Cola, all marketing activity will be suspended and therefore Olympics marketing won't take place, or brands may consider that the Olympics offers an interesting platform without the sporting competition – such as global Olympic partner Toyota, who are demonstrating this with the release of their inspiring 'Heroic Medal' campaign, which was created to applaud the work of frontline workers during Covid-19.

At its core, the Olympics it promotes values such as togetherness respect and unity. Putting to one side the literal interpretation of togetherness (obviously), the world needs these values to come to the fore now more than ever. People are also craving home entertainment, and physical experiences at home. Therefore, even without the event taking place, the Olympics does provide an opportunity for partners to consider both purpose driven campaigns and / or working with athletes or archive to put a smile on people's faces and keep them active during lockdown and the months after. No additional IP is required for the partners, the platform is already theirs.

The latest highly informative Global Web Index (GBI) report on coronavirus suggests that the overwhelming majority of consumers are supportive of brands running campaigns with messaging which responds directly to the pandemic, or seeks to entertain consumers. The number of consumers who approve of organisations running ‘normal’ advertising campaigns is much lower. Consequently, brands can’t be seen as insensitive or exploitative at this moment in time, and the Olympics is neither.

If we believe that advertisers who remain active will recover quicker after the global crisis, then the Olympics does offer a platform for both Olympic partners and advertisers alike this summer. Aligning with the statements they made after the postponement announcement in March, partners can further demonstrate notions of support and commitment with action. A campaign that’s both inspiring and pertinent to how people are feeling now has a great chance of creating impact and value for brands in a positive way ahead of 2021.

Watching the strategies of other brands unfold this summer will be interesting. A little less captivating than watching the event itself perhaps, but we are in uncharted territory so watch this space and expect innovation.

James Venn, Business Director, Publicis Sport & Entertainment