



Chicago 2016: Using Events to Communicate a Message

The campaign to win an Olympic Games is multi-faceted. First and foremost bid cities must compete internationally against other world-class cities. Each city must determine its international hook and prove to the International Olympic Committee (IOC) that it will bring the most to the Olympic movement. In addition to the international competition, bid cities must campaign for the support of the general public who often believe the Olympics will bring financial stress, inconvenience and that the games will be inaccessible to local spectators.

OVERVIEW

Using events as part of a campaign to win domestic and international support for an Olympic bid or other marketing campaign is a visible and tangible way to build and communicate a brand. The brand itself must be authentic and simple to be believable by all audiences. In any campaign there are competitors and detractors who are working against the brand message who are able to get their voice heard creating doubt in the target audience. The campaign must address these negative messages without engaging the detractors themselves. Seamless event execution also communicates that the organization is capable of staging more complex events and increases confidence in the host organization.

DETAILS

Leading Events for Chicago 2016 provided an opportunity to create and execute a series of unique events for the International community that told a story of a city founded by immigrants who overcame adversity to become a world-class city capable of hosting an Olympic Games. At the same time, a series of domestic events were required to create public support for the bid among those who were afraid of the financial risks and did not really understand the power of sport to transcend global politics and build a bridge of friendship across the world.

The International and Domestic campaigns crossed paths on two important occasions: The IOC Evaluation Commission Visit and the Copenhagen Supporter Program. The series of events organized for these two important milestones brought the brand messages together and communicated to the world that Chicago was the best choice for the Olympic Games.

For the Evaluation Commission visit, a dozen IOC members, their staff and advisors visited Chicago in early April when the weather is unpredictable. Selling Chicago in April for an event in July and August required a lot of creativity and a bit of luck. They had both.

The purpose of the visit is for the IOC to meet with the bid leadership and learn the technical details of the bid. It also gives the IOC a chance to see the people of Chicago and gauge their desire for the Games, to see the venues and determine their suitability, and to experience an evening in the city to make an emotional connection to the bid and its leadership.



Hundreds of people were responsible for bringing the city together for the Evaluation Commission visit, many working pro bono or for reduced fees to stretch the bids campaign funds. Thousands of volunteers came to cheer the IOC as they moved about the city. The Commission was hosted by the city's leadership at a dinner held at the Modern Wing of The Art Institute overlooking Millennium Park where Buddy Guy and Koko Taylor sang "My Kind of Town" - to communicate what a public/private partnership is capable of doing when all work together. As the last technical sessions ended, the bid staff and volunteers cheered the IOC as they departed for the airport. Some IOC members left with tears in their eyes.

In Copenhagen, the site of the IOC session where the 2016 host city decision was held, Chicago had over 500 supporters on site for the last opportunities to make that emotional connection to the voters. While the official business consisted of one last presentation to the entire IOC voting body, the Supporter group participated in a variety of events carefully designed to reinforce and continue the brand messages that had been built in the two-year campaign. Olympians and Paralympians as well as government officials, celebrities, CEO's and civic leadership shared an experience many still talk about. Events consisted of athlete visits to local Danish youth sporting clubs, bicycle tour of Copenhagen historic sites, Supporter dinner attended by The First Lady of the United States and Oprah Winfrey, morning stretch and Fun Run and Supporter Rally across from the IOC Opening Session.

BENEFITS

Using events to communicate a specific message engages people as a branding element, increasing the power of the communication. Not only do the emotional elements of the message come to life for the audience, the participants benefit from belonging to a group focused on a common goal. In the case of the Chicago 2016 campaign, over 26,000 volunteers signed up to support the bid, many through attending events held to increase domestic support for the bid. Five thousand or so of these volunteers contributed over 100,000 hours in support of the bid, bringing human resources that would have not otherwise been possible to the campaign.

Using events to tell a story that unfolds over time keeps the audience engaged and builds momentum to the pivotal moment, the host city election in the case of the Olympic bid or a product launch or important announcement in another context. At the last Supporter rally on the eve of the Host city election, a well-known member of Chicago media was heard saying "this is the best event I have ever attended". At its most simple, it was cocktails on a boardwalk for 300 people dressed in branded blue jackets waving orange scarves as a boat full of IOC members cruised past.

Footnote: In the Host City election, Rio de Janeiro prevailed in the IOC voting to win the right to host the 2016 Summer Games. Brazil's branding message was simple, emotional and compelling: South America has never hosted an Olympic Games. All of the bid cities waged solid campaigns using many of the techniques discussed here. Chicago and all the people involved gained much from the bid experience and should leverage the experience to attract new opportunities for its residents, business and civic communities.

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