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Olympic sponsors missing out on 'special' opportunity

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To: Sponsorship executives at Coca-Cola, John Hancock, IBM, Kodak, McDonald's, NBC Sports, Panasonic, Samsung, Time Inc., UPS, Visa, Fuji, Xerox, Nike, Goodyear, Swatch, Shell, Mizuno and Harley-Davidson

Cc: Competitors of the above, including Pepsi, Dr Pepper, Prudential, Northwestern Mutual, Burger King, Wendy's, Sony, Nokia, Disney/ESPN, Federal Express, Reebok, Adidas, the U.S. Postal Service, MasterCard, American Express, Canon Copiers and anyone else in the sports sponsorship arena

Bcc: IOC members, including potential president-elect Dick Pound, Kevan Gosper and Jacques Rogge; USOC executives, NGB executives.

I've got a great Olympic sponsorship platform for you.

Just before the Games began, I attended the Pre-Olympic Congress in Brisbane. This academic conference provided scholars from around the world a chance to present papers on issues related to sport.

The conference was endorsed by the IOC and opened with a letter of welcome from Juan Antonio Samaranch, who said the IOC must "ensure the future development of sport [is done] in a way that will benefit society."

Who could be against that?

On the first day of the Congress, however, Dr. Ted Fay of Cortland State University gave a compelling presentation on sport and disability. He suggested the Olympic movement has at times struggled with the concepts of women, blacks and Jews competing in the sacred Games. Now, he suggested, the Olympic generals are uneasy about the immediate presence of disabled athletes.

To be honest, I had never really thought much about disability sport. But a few things happened in Australia to change my opinion.

The first was Sydney's spectacular opening ceremonies where Australian sprinting champ (and Olympic gold medalist) Betty Cuthbert, confined to her wheelchair, played an integral role in the torch-lighting at Stadium Australia. Like Muhammad Ali in Atlanta in 1996, a disabled former athlete commanded center stage.

The second incident took place when McDonald's, an Olympic TOP worldwide sponsor and Paralympic Games partner, ran a very funny TV commercial about an elderly woman "escaping" from a nursing home in her wheelchair to buy Big Macs for other impaired residents. The ad, which ran during Australian Olympic

broadcasts, was working fine until a McDonald's near Brisbane banned a quadriplegic from using his motorized wheelchair in its drive-through lane.

Finally, as the Games drew to a close, Marla Runyan, who is legally blind, qualified for the women's 1,500-meter final and ran wonderfully to finish eighth. In making the U.S. team and qualifying for Sydney, Runyan became the first Paralympian ever to participate in the Olympics.

You great and powerful companies attempting to leverage sales, increase product visibility and optimize co-branded partnerships via the IOC and future Olympiads, here's where I'm going with this. The Paralympic Games will be held in Sydney in the same Olympic facilities Oct. 18-29. That's after the network camera crews and most of the sponsor VIPs go home. In fact, I'd be surprised if there was any media coverage in the United States for the disabled table tennis, sitting volleyball or wheelchair rugby.

That's wrong.

Wrong because Olympic-style sport should be about inclusion and celebration. And, if you want gut-wrenching performances and stories of unbelievable courage, look no further. Most Paralympians would make the fortitude of your "true" Olympians look pretty pale.

Let's get a dose of reality, though.

It doesn't make economic sense for the networks. It's a tough time zone play, a sensitive subject and none of the disabled athletes play above the rim, net or table. It just wouldn't televise well. Sports editors across the land would have a hard time believing their readers want coverage on intellectual disability basketball, disabled fencing or goalball.

So we're all comfortable with burying this story, right?

Well, what about the IOC and USOC? Where should they stand? Aren't they the keepers of the "true" flame? Or is it possible, as has been implied, that the Paralympians are a nuisance?

These "special" athletes don't want to be treated equally, do they? They can't possibly want their events held at the same time as the "true" Olympians, can they? They can't possibly want to represent their countries, can they?

Let's see. They're all super competitive. They come from all over the world to uphold an Olympic ideal. They compete for the love of sport with little sponsorship and an absence of financial influence. Sounds "old-school" Olympian.

If $A=B$ and $B=C$, then Paralympians equal Olympians. If sport represents all that is good, then let the inclusion Games begin.

And here's the best part, sponsors. The number of people who consider themselves disabled or are related to someone who is disabled is staggering. I'm guessing disability touches every house in America. The relevance to your consumers could be huge and the CPM (if activated strategically) really small.

Think of it. Instead of worrying about NBC's future ratings you could create a relationship with your global societies that truly offered hope and made people feel good.

As a gut check, I asked Scot Smythe, Visa International's vice president of sponsorship, about it and he said Visa saw disabled sport as "a business opportunity and not a cause." In fact, he went so far as to say it was a "very worthwhile investment."

With 18 sports, 125 countries represented, more than 4,000 athletes, 2,000 team officials and 10,000 volunteers signed up for Sydney, some of you sponsors should think about getting in on the ground floor for Salt Lake or Athens. Right now, IBM is the only American-based worldwide partner and Fuji, Xerox, Kodak, Swatch, Coca-Cola, Time Inc., Boise Cascade and McDonald's the only North American-based partners or supporters.

Since no one seems to be doing a lot with this, it could be that second quarter 2002 promotion you were looking for. Think it over. I'll waive my consulting fee if you make a sponsorship commitment to the next Paralympic Games.

Rick Burton is director of the Warsaw Sports Marketing Center at the University of Oregon's Lundquist College of Business.

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