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What Americans Can Learn from Sports Day in Canada?

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What Americans can learn from Sports Day in Canada

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**RICK
BURTON**

One of the most spectacular and inspiring sports moments of 2010 was Sidney Crosby sliding the puck past American goalie Ryan Miller to win the Vancouver Winter Olympics ice hockey gold medal for the Canadians. That moment was every holiday wish come early for Canadians young and old.

But what if “les Canadians” wanted to give another gift to the United States that didn’t involve heartache and dejection? What if for Christmas, Hanukkah and Kwanzaa, Canada gave the U.S. a humble Boxing Day present that could truly benefit Americans and American sport industrialists?



**NORM
O'REILLY**

The gift, presented here as just a simple idea, is Sports Day in Canada, and it’s not a difficult concept to grasp. In fact, it demonstrates that effective nationalistic sport projects can be nationwide but still grassroots in their orientation.

Concepts like this are commonly built in other countries around mega-events like the Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cup. But grassroots activations using a country theme can be as simple as Soccer Day or Basketball Day. They don’t need a mega-event; just a commitment from a group like the U.S. Olympic Committee or even the White House. They just need vision.

In the case of Sports Day in Canada, that passion came from ParticipACTION, a well-known nonprofit advocate for physical activity and sport participation in Canada supported by the Canadian government and corporate partners.

Building on the concept of previous Canadian TV-driven events like Hockey Day and Soccer Day, Sports Day in Canada was held for the first time in September, with Canadian organizations and citizens from coast to coast encouraged to host or join in sports and physical-activity events. Events took place between Sept. 11 and 18, culminating with six hours of national television coverage. The CBC (and its French sister station, Radio-Canada) partnered on the program with a full day of coverage including programming on triathlon, swimming, rugby, para sport, gymnastics, basketball and swimming, as well as one-hour shows specific to Sports Day called “What Moves Canada” and “What Moves Canada’s Kids.”

“The first Sports Day in Canada built off the magic of the 2010 Olympics and Paralympics to galvanize the sport sector around a common purpose,” said Kelly Murumets, president and CEO of ParticipACTION. “Not only did we register over 1,000 local celebration events in communities across the country, we saw over 1.25 million

Canadians join us as spectators or participants. We mobilized national, regional, local, broadcast, sport, media, sponsor and government partners who wore their hearts on their sleeves — in a way that benefited each individual organization as well as the sector as a whole.”

So how did it work?

■ **It had a champion with a great brand and credibility.**

ParticipACTION, thanks to a memorable campaign in the 1980s, was reborn in 2007, six years after it ceased operating when its government funding was cut.

Since its rebirth, ParticipACTION had adopted and developed a diverse and successful funding model that included government funding, partnerships and fundraising. In addition to CBC and Radio-Canada, partners involved in Sports Day in Canada included True Sport, Canadian Soccer Association, Canadian Olympic Committee, IMI International Research, Canadian Paralympic Committee, Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport, and the Coaching Association of Canada.

“Partnerships for Sports Day in Canada were more than just components of an inaugural funding model. Securing strategic partnerships with national voices like CBC, True Sport, the COC and CPC were vital platforms to effectively promote community engagement at a grassroots level,” said Mark Harrison, president of TrojanOne, the agency engaged in the development of Sports Day in Canada. “The equity Sports Day in Canada gained through partnerships allowed the movement to steep its roots deep into communities across Canada and deliver inspirational stories that got Canadians moving.”

■ **A long-term integrated promotion perspective was taken.**

The 2011 version is already in the works, and concepts like Jersey Day increased attention. Held Sept. 17, Canadians were asked to show support for sport by wearing a jersey, team or club uniform to school, work or play.

“Jersey Day is a very important element of the entire Sports Day in Canada campaign,” Harrison said. “It’s a simple premise but it forges a highly visible collective action, anticipation and ultimately awareness. Whether it drives a themed civvies day at your local school, or turns your office into a sea of throwback jerseys, it generates a good PR story and allows Canadians to make the day theirs, whether at work or play.”

■ **Timing and activation are critical.**

Sports Day in Canada followed just months after the very successful Vancouver Olympics, and that timing found Canadians still basking in a sense of pride for their country. For Americans, pride in sports events, teams and athletes is entrenched and top sporting performances common. It is a matter of leveraging this pride through well-timed and supported grassroots activations.

So there you have it. A holiday gift sent south by the folks who are quietly taking a proactive stance on countrywide sport participation. Wonder if the Americans will want to play with this gift when they get their hands around it?

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