

SPONSORSHIP

Guerrilla marketing: where is it now?

FROM DAVID ATKINSON

WITH 12 months passed since London 2012, and just a year to go until the 2014 World Cup in Brazil and the Glasgow Commonwealth Games, it seems a good time to consider the state of ambush, or guerrilla, marketing in the sports world.

There's no doubt the threat of guerrilla marketing occupied the thoughts of those involved in London 2012 as never before. But the Olympics also formed a landmark in the way that guerrilla marketing was managed for major global events.

First, let's look at what guerrilla marketing is – and why it happens. There are, in essence, two kinds of guerrilla marketing. The first comes from smaller, maybe controversial brands with comparatively small budgets trying to afford some of the glory of the bigger players. Think Paddy Power. It's possible to appreciate the endeavours of these brands, if they operate within appropriate boundaries and don't try to pass themselves off as official sponsors.

Then there are the global brands where there are two key competitors in a market. Both will be competing for the same audience, but only one is able to command official partner or sponsor status – think Coke/Pepsi or Nike/Adidas.

In these cases, the non-sponsor brand won't want to lose ground to their rival but still aims to capitalise on the event's feel-good factor – without going beyond its unofficial status.

There is a third element in guerrilla marketing – when brand activities cross the line from association into endorsement – that could be construed as non-sponsors trying to pass themselves off as having official status. That's what brand owners, sponsorship teams and event



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organisers fear. This was the biggest concern of the Olympics – and with good reason. The entry price to these global events is such that sponsorship can be the central pillar of a brand's global marketing activity and the climax of several years' work. Protection of that investment (access, use of official assets and rights, and the Olympic rings being among the most prized) has become the greatest obsession for sponsors, and a kind of creative and strategic utopia for non-sponsors.

THIS MEANS WAR

The phrase 'guerrilla marketing' conjures images of war tactics, so it's no surprise that the practice has a murky history. Its origins are usually traced to American Express in the '80s, but it is most recognisably associated with Nike's war of attrition with Adidas over nearly 30 years.

At the 1996 Atlanta Olympics, having taken all the ad sites around the city, Nike built a vast Nike village opposite the locations created by the official sponsor, Adidas. This sort of activity has repeatedly given Nike misappropriated sponsorship recognition levels comparable to official sponsors.

London 2012 was a turning point in the history of guer-

rilla marketing. The ambush tactics of previous World Cups and Olympics had been widely criticised, with one notable example during the 2010 World Cup in South Africa showing how not to respond. There, a group of women wearing orange dresses, believed to be part of a campaign to promote Bavaria beer, were ejected from a stadium and two were arrested. FIFA then filed criminal charges against Bavaria. While FIFA followed the letter of the law in defending the rights of its sponsors, its tactics were seen as heavy-handed.

But despite the media furor over ambush potential before the London 2012 Games, once the event was underway the subject dropped from sight. There were no arrests, no forced removal of the Olympic Breakfast from the Little Chef menu, no exclamations of foul play. There were some flashpoints, such as Paddy Power's 'London' sports event (which took place in London, France). LOCOG insisted billboards for it should be removed but later backed down.

But overall, London 2012 was praised for getting its stance on guerrilla marketing right – and it has set the tone for the future protection of official rights holders. At the time of Nike's ad featuring athletes from towns

called London all over the world, a LOCOG spokesperson said: "Our approach to enforcing the 2006 Act has always been sensible, pragmatic and proportionate. We have to protect the rights of our sponsors, who have paid for exclusive associations with the Games in their sponsorship categories. We are tough on commercial abuse, but we don't want to do anything to dampen genuine enthusiasm and excitement about the Games."

That final point is important – LOCOG's recognition that as long as lines are not crossed (and protecting sponsor rights must always come first), an element of guerrilla activity can further heighten anticipation.

So what next for guerrilla marketing? What can we expect in Brazil and Glasgow next year? As the cost of holding big ticket events continues to grow, sponsors will be ever-present. And where there are sponsors, there are brands that want a piece of the action. Last year was a watershed – brands using guerrilla marketing avoided backstreet tactics and earned a little more respect for remaining on the right side of the line.

Sponsor brands must protect their rights, but there's an understanding that the smaller Davids (to the big brands' Goliaths) will be allowed to do small, creative things. And the second-player brands will have to work even harder to go right up to the line of what's allowed while adding value to the overall event.

Guerrilla marketing is here to stay. But the boundaries have been drawn in a truce that leaves both parties in no doubt about the rules. Let's hope they continue to play by them.

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