

DNA of Olympism — The marketing of Olympic tradition

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This presentation and this Academy today will explore issues relating to the Olympic brand, which is of interest both to educators and marketers. The intersection of Olympic commerce and ethics raises many important questions that are worth exploring.

The title of this paper drew inspiration from a 2006 book published by former IOC marketing manager, Michael Payne, *Olympic Turnaround, is How the Olympic Games Stepped Back from the Brink of Extinction to Become the World's Best Known Brand.*ⁱ

Olympic Turnaround

In a chapter entitled 'Beyond the Brand', Payne argued that there was a need to better understand and harness the power of the Olympic brand by distilling 'the essence' of the Olympic Games. He posed the following questions. What does the Olympic symbol 'really stand for'? Do the rings mean the same in China, in the sub-Sahara and in Peru, as they do in western countries?

After the 1998 Nagano Winter Olympic Games the International Olympic Committee (IOC) embarked on what Payne described as the broadest market research program ever undertaken by a sports organisation. The aim was to better understand the 'consumer's true perception of the Olympic brand'. It is ironic that the IOC began this brand-building exercise at the time of the Salt Lake City crisis in 1998 and 1999 when it developed television announcements to promote Olympic values.

The brand analyst, Edgar Dunn, along with Terence Dunn from the IOC's marketing agency, Meridian, undertook a comprehensive study with interviews and focus groups involving over 5500 persons in 11 countries. There were a further series of 250 interviews with key media, the Olympic family and sponsor opinion leaders. The aim was to discover, as Payne put it, 'the Olympic DNA' — hence the title of this presentation.

Payne stated that the results were remarkably consistent. The research identified four key propositions for the Olympic brand:

Hope The Olympic Games offer hope for a better world, using sport competition for all and without discrimination as an example and a lesson.

Dreams and inspiration The Olympic Games provide inspiration to achieve personal dreams through the lessons of the athlete's strong, sacrifice and determination. The intrinsic brand message conveys the enduring power of the Olympic Games to inspire humanity to achieve.

Friendship and fair play The Olympic Games provide tangible examples of how humanity can overcome political, economic, religious and racial prejudices through the values inherent in sport.

Joy in effort The Olympic Games celebrate the universal joy in doing one's best, regardless of the outcome. Through their honour and dignity in competition, Olympic athletes teach lessons to us all.

Payne noted the paradox that non-commercial values provided the Olympic brand with its true commercial and marketing value. He also acknowledged that there had been tensions in the past between the commercial and non-commercial outreach of the IOC. Implicitly, he accepted that commercial goals could possibly undercut and even pose a threat to the realisation of non-commercial goals.

Once Payne had identified 'the Olympic DNA' he set about to disseminate it. The study findings were 'cultivated, reinforced and enshrined them in Celebrate Humanity campaigns'. The television campaign drew on the work of filmmaker Bud Greenspan, who focused on the athletes overcoming obstacles to compete and finishing their respective Olympic events despite great handicaps. One of his most moving stories was the celebrated finish of Tanzanian marathon runner, John Stephen Akhwari, at the 1968 Olympic Games. Long after the race had been won, the medals awarded and the spectators had left the stadium, a lonely runner with his leg bandaged and limped to the finishing line in obvious pain. When asked why he kept on competing to the end he stated that his country had not sent him just to start the race, it had sent him to finish the event. Greenspan also captured the joy of a Nigerian 400 metre relay team in 1984 when they thought they had finished fourth only to discover (via the scoreboard) that they had won the bronze medal. Greenspan thus focuses not only on the gold medallists but also athletes as a whole.

Payne's key arguments are as follows:

1. The Olympic brand, and Olympism, is dynamic rather than fixed and static. There is a need to redefine its essence in a changing society and sporting environment. Frances Malone, in her report on a recent Olympic Academy, noted that the IOC has recognised the need to update and redefine its core Olympic values and has revealed that five specific values will be identified in the near future. The IOC has developed an Olympic Values Education program, to be delivered in late 2006 to all NOCs and NOAs. The program will contain the content for delivering an Olympic Education program

2. The Olympic brand needs to adapt to cultural sensitivities of non-western countries such as China, sub-Saharan Africa and Peru. Olympism was initially framed by men primarily from Europe and North America.
3. The IOC and Olympic Academies, like this one, should look at new ways of disseminating the Olympic brand and the values that it represents.
4. There needs to be the right balance between commercial and non-commercial priorities to reduce potential tensions in the use of the Olympic brand.

What is a brand?

Westerbeek and Smith elaborate on the nature of branding:

A brand is the extended story of a product, expressed in a logo and extended visual imagery. It is symbolism that is widely understood by the (to be) converted members of the product clan. Global organisations, through their branding attempt to tell stories about their products that will capture the imagination of the global clan ...ⁱⁱ

Phil Knight, co-founder of Nike, has argued that a brand is something strong and powerful 'that creates an emotion in a person's mind', which can be positive or negative.ⁱⁱⁱ

Nike made much of the story of Steve Prefontaine, an outstanding athlete who was killed in a car crash at the age of just 24. Nike's annual athletic carnival honours Prefontaine's name.

Nike did more than honour the memory of Prefontaine. It elevated the story of a young athlete — of athletic potential only partly fulfilled — thereby enhancing the Nike story.

What is the Olympic brand and why is it so powerful?

There are many ingredients to the Olympic brand. Anthropologist John MacAloon stated that it was ceremonies that make the Olympic Games different from world championships and world cups. MacAloon noted that the opening ceremony, even though it includes no sport, is the most sought after event of the Games. The symbols and ceremonies displayed at the opening ceremony include the five rings, the torch, the flag, the anthem, the oaths and so forth.

Then there are the three dimensions of Olympism — sport, culture and the environment. The latter was added only in the 1990s thereby demonstrating that Olympism continues to evolve. Olympism promotes values such as fair play, the worth of sports participation, respect for one's opponent, internationalism and non-discrimination (gender and race and so forth).

Payne stated that ‘the Olympic brand is about athletic prowess and fair play, but it is also about trust in the Olympic ideals — fraternity, friendship, peace and universal understanding.

The links to antiquity and the ancient Olympics — the power of tradition — add weight to the power of the Games. The modern Olympics also extend the notion in the ancient Olympics that athletics should be linked to culture and the development of the whole person.

The five rings

The five rings and the Olympic flame are the most potent Olympic symbols. Payne noted that the Olympic torch had become ‘the magic wand for the Games’.

IOC President Pierre de Coubertin fashioned this symbol for private use in 1913. He wrote in the *Olympic Review* in 1913 about how ‘the five rings represent the five parts of the world, now won over to Olympism [and] the six colours combined the colours of every country [flag] without exception’. The interlocking rings suggest the idea of harmony between nations.

The rings are highly valued by marketers. The use of the five rings by carefully selected sponsor companies was a core Olympic of The Olympic Program (TOP), which was an immensely successful program from the 1980s which helped to underwrite the cost of staging the contemporary Games.

Barney, Wenn and Martyn in their authoritative study, *Selling the Five Rings*, noted that when de Coubertin developed this symbol he would have had no idea that it would become ‘a commercial gold mine’.^{iv}

Threats to the brand

There has been a long history of protecting the Olympic brand. The need to protect the brand was recognised by Avery Brundage in the 1930s. He had a long-running and celebrated confrontation with Los Angeles bread impresario, Paul H. Helms, whose bread was advertised as Olympic bread at the time of the 1932 Los Angeles Olympic Games. Helms wished to retain the Olympic association, and the five rings, on his bread after 1932.

Ironically it was not until the 1980s that the IOC achieved protection for its brand enabling it to develop the TOP program.

The over-commercialisation of the Olympic brand is one significant threat. Michael Payne noted in the organisers of the 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games promoted ‘Peace’ cigarettes that carried the Olympic emblem.

While there were excellent examples of the partnership between the business community and the Games at the time of the Atlanta 1996 Olympic Games, Payne noted that there were some excesses. Critics pointed to 'Jeopardy — the official Olympic Game show', the official Vidalia onion sauce or the official toilet seat cover.

One prominent international company, which was not an Olympic sponsor in 1996 and engaged in ambush marketing at the time, developed slogans such as 'the silver medallist is the first loser'. This contradicted the Celebrate Humanity campaign and the emphasis of Bud Greenspan's films.

Then there are the academic sceptics, such as Canadian scholar Kevin Wamsley, who published a paper entitled 'Laying Olympism to Rest'. He argued that Olympic ideals were no longer relevant to an established sports spectacle:

Spectators and fans are quite content to flock to the current product [the Olympic Games] with or without WADA. Athletes pursue gold medals willingly at the expense of their own bodies. Tearing away the layers of hyperbole, the glorious rhetoric and grandiose ethical proclamations, revealing the Olympics as a sport spectacle just might make the games of the twenty-first century a bit more honest.^v

Members of this Academy are unlikely to accept such a view. A key issue, nonetheless, is to consider how core non-commercial values can retain their rightful place in the primary display of the brand in the sports spectacle.

Questions for today:

What is the story of the Olympic brand?

Is Olympism something that is fixed and permanent? Does it require reinterpretation to adapt to a rapidly changing sports environment?

How can Olympism best be conveyed to new audiences?

What are the main threats to the dissemination of the Olympic brand?

How can marketers be encouraged to promote the non-commercial essence of the Olympic brand?

Are there continuing tensions between Olympic values and commercial interests and, if so, how can they best be resolved?

ⁱ Praeger, Greenwood, 2006.

ⁱⁱ Westerbeek and Smith, *Sport Business in the Global Marketplace*, p. 189.

ⁱⁱⁱ ABC *Four Corners*, *Branded: Nike*, (based on a BCC program), 27 Jan. 1997.

^{iv} Robert K. Barney, Stephen R. Wenn and Scott G. Martyn, *Selling the Five Rings: The International Olympic Committee and the Rise of Olympic Commercialism*, University of Utah Press, Salt Lake City, 2002, p. 25.

^v Bale and Christensen, *Post-Olympism*, p. 241.