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Automaker using Games to rebrand as mobility company

The inside story of using Pyeongchang to rebrand as a mobility company

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By early 2016, nearly a year had passed since Toyota signed its blockbuster global sponsorship deal with the International Olympic Committee, but the automaker was still stuck on a theme for its campaign.

Top internal marketers on two continents, along with senior leaders from both Saatchi & Saatchi and Dentsu, were searching for an idea that could spur a brand evolution for Toyota from car company to “the human movement company.”

The entire point of Toyota's aggressive move into the Olympics' mobility category was to showcase concept products like Project Blaid, a wearable device that helps blind people navigate their immediate surroundings, or a human support robot for the elderly. But the blue-chip creative team — the first time Dentsu and Saatchi ever worked together — insisted the campaign focus on people, not products.

“At first it was about putting people on a level playing field,” recalls Jason Schragger, Saatchi & Saatchi chief creative officer. “But people don't want to get to zero. They want to get somewhere incredible. We looked at amputees who have prosthetics that were made for walking, and they climb a mountain in it. It was never designed to climb a mountain, but the people made it happen.”

A series of meetings in Los Angeles and Tokyo and contributions from Toyota teams in more than 20 countries led to “Start The Impossible.”

But that still wasn't right. “The Impossible” sounds like someone else's problem. In the early summer of 2016, they changed one word and nailed it: “Start *Your* Impossible.”

In a single stroke, Schragger recalls, they blended the Olympic motto of faster, higher, stronger with a flexible, personal call to action. It even dovetailed with Toyota Motor North America's more practical “Let's Go Places” tagline.



“It felt a lot more powerful when there was an onus on you to do something,” Schragger said.

“Everyone's got their little side hustle, or their little dream, or something they want to achieve, that in any point in time can feel impossible. It's incredible how many times we all can manage to achieve that thing that a week ago seemed absolutely out of reach.”

Today, “Start Your Impossible” anchors Toyota's first Olympics in the International Olympic Committee's TOP (The Olympic Partner) program, after it had to wait for several country-level car deals to expire after Rio 2016 to claim global rights. The campaign spawned 10 television

commercials with versions running in 40 markets, a digital-social campaign, local and regional commercials and, not insignificantly, the decentralized company's first corporate initiative to touch its approximately 370,000 employees.

It's still the top of the first inning for this campaign, designed to carry over multiple Olympics, possibly through the end of its current contract after Paris 2024. But so far, Toyota is executing a classically ambitious Olympic marketing campaign, in the vein of Visa and Procter & Gamble before it, said Bob Heussner, CEO of StrongBridge Sponsorship and a top former consultant to former U.S. Olympic Committee and London 2012 sponsor BMW.

“This is not a toe in the water, it's a full-body plunge,” Heussner said.

Going beyond the car

When the first “Start Your Impossible” commercial aired in November, the market noticed what wasn't anywhere in the creative: a car. The company says its key performance indicators on its sponsorship are not sales related.

But it's not so radical, insists Jack Hollis, group vice president and general manager of Toyota Motor North America. He says Toyota is just responding to changing notions of what an advanced manufacturer ought to be able to provide. “They almost expect us to do more because of the technology and

expertise, the quality and dependability of the products,” he said. “They believe there’s probably more we can add to society.”



Toyota is not alone in an auto industry that seems to be on the verge of radical disruption. Its decision to dub itself “the human movement company” comes nearly a year after Ford’s “Go Further” Super Bowl commercial that touched a similar tone.

But by buying the Olympics’ first global car deal, Toyota bought a unique platform to tell that story, experts said. “Everyone is talking mobility now,” Heussner said. “But what Toyota’s going to be able to do with the Olympics is tell that story with more power and bring it to life in a way their competitors frankly can’t.”

The Games deals are both hyperintense for three weeks every two years, and a broad, long-term platform, he added. In February, Toyota is taking advantage of having media time and global attention on the same event for 17 days, giving it the chance to run spots that both set the branding stage for “mobility” and show off the skunk works mobility products.

By doing secondary deals with the U.S. Olympic Committee, its four largest winter sports governing bodies and 19 Olympic or Paralympic athletes, Toyota also has staked a long-term claim to be the only carmaker in the Olympic movement.

Later in 2015, it also signed a deal with the International Paralympic Committee. The Paralympics, a far smaller deal financially, offer even better message alignment than the Olympics and numerous opportunities to demonstrate new products with disabled athletes. “Para is just as, if not more, important to us,” said Chris Schultz, general manager of Olympic/Paralympic marketing for Toyota North America.

Prior to Toyota, the auto category was always sold by individual Games organizers and national Olympic committees. That meant the global brands always had a chance to one-up each other the next time around. But, Heussner noted, Toyota’s 2015 deal covers Tokyo 2020, Beijing 2022 and Paris 2024, and gives it the right of first negotiation to extend into Los Angeles ’28.

It also gives the technology that the company is promoting a chance to actually make it to market.

“This is smart not only from an offensive point of view, but a defensive point of view,” Heussner said. “Now you’ve got so many platforms the others don’t.”

Working together

Aside from a brand shift, Toyota President Akio Toyoda had a secondary goal in mind for the Olympics: bringing the 370,000-strong global workforce together, aligning them under a single theme and testing their capacity to work together. That goes for its agencies, too.

In that sense, Toyota calls to mind other employee-focused Olympic programs of the past, like when UPS spent 60 percent of its Olympic budget simply to boost morale among its employees, or in 1994 when John Hancock Insurance added \$60 million in revenue in a single year by making Olympic attendance a sales incentive.

“A lot of companies at the CEO level think, ‘I wonder how the organization would react to something like this, a central theme?’” said Rob Prazmark, the former IMG Olympic sponsorship sales head. “That’s part of the reasons they make these global decisions. It really is a rallying point for the entire corporation to get behind. And there’s some key learnings that come out of that.”

Those early brainstorming groups earned a new code name, Colympics, to highlight how extraordinary it was. In one room, Toyota corporate marketing division GM Susumu Matsuda, Toyota North America’s Hollis, Saatchi & Saatchi’s Schragger and executive director Al Reid, and their Dentsu counterparts, Executive Creative Director Keiichi Higuchi and Executive Director Taira Kimura, met on the same project for the first time.

“We got rid of agency names and just created one team,” Hollis said.

After starting with the Japanese and American leadership, the group held two multiday retreats that included research and consultation from 20 more markets globally. And over the course of 2017, marketers learned to adjust to the painstaking, slow work of translation, adapting messages for cultural relevancy, learning how best to deliver the global campaign with key Olympic teams and athletes in each country.

“There has never been a global marketing campaign initiated at Toyota, so for us the opportunity to really create new processes, a new infrastructure, work across numerous regions across the world, has been a fantastic opportunity to figure out a way in which we can communicate one unified message globally,” said Dedra DeLilli, Toyota’s Olympics marketing group manager.

‘Let’s Go Places’

Since “Start Your Impossible” launched, the North American division has staffed up to handle another major sports marketing initiative. Hollis tapped Schultz, the longtime GM of Toyota’s New York region, to run its Olympic marketing and hired DeLilli from TD Ameritrade, where she ran its USOC sponsorship until it expired last year, as his top deputy. Longtime agency MKTG led the creation of the domestic marketing plan.

Stateside, Toyota is sticking with its “Let’s Go Places” tagline for the Games in a more literal, sales-focused pitch.

“The beauty is, [‘Start Your Impossible’ and ‘Let’s Go Places’] don’t fight each other,” said David Grant, MKTG president of sports and entertainment. “They’re complimentary messages, when you think about what ‘Let’s Go Places’ really means. It’s not ‘Let’s go from point A to point B in a literal sense.’”

In one example titled “It Takes a Village,” the viewer sees images of speedskater Sugar Todd’s life during her training days, with the extensive help of her family and neighbors, who all drive Toyotas.

Before even Schultz and DeLilli were on board, Toyota had secured title sponsorship of U.S. Ski & Snowboard’s Grand Prix series of Olympic qualifiers. It’s added deals with U.S. Speedskating, U.S. Figure Skating and extended an old deal with USA Hockey.

The goal in signing those governing body deals, Grant said, was to give dealerships a wide slate of options for sports, athletes and events they can leverage in local or regional sales initiatives. Local dealerships will be given creative templates to extend the campaign into showrooms and local airwaves, too. While the message gets more sales-oriented as it gets closer to the consumer, they want all of it to tie back to “human movement.”

“You will definitely see an integration of vehicles, but it’s very much about the role that the vehicle plays in the journey of the athletes as well as Toyota’s commitment to help support athletes on their journey to the Games,” DeLilli said.

The future

Pyeongchang is just the starting point, and a subdued one at that. Toyota will coordinate media for its sponsored athletes in South Korea, but it won’t play the role most classically associated with Olympic car sponsors — IOC officials and athletes will be using Hyundai and Kia vehicles instead of Toyotas. A year after the IOC signed Toyota, Toyota waived its on-the-ground rights back to Pyeongchang organizers to sell to Korean manufacturers.

Executives call this first Olympics a time to work out the kinks in an eight-year plan. “We know we’ll probably make some mistakes,” Schultz said. “We plan to learn a lot and prepare better and execute better around Tokyo 2020.”

By then, Toyota hopes, it will be able to sell some of those mobility devices in the same way it sells cars today. But Schultz is noncommittal, knowing that research and development doesn’t move at the same scheduled pace as marketing.

Toyota, which paid a reported \$835 million for its IOC deal, entered 2017 as the world’s second-largest car seller by volume, narrowly falling behind Volkswagen AG in 2016 after holding the title for the previous four years. Last year in the U.S., Toyota’s market share ticked up from 14 to 14.1 percent, placing it again third behind Ford and General Motors, according to Wall Street Journal data.

But Schultz said Toyota’s initial expectations are not about sales. “The one KPI [key performance indicator] that I think we’re most passionate about is to have our brand become a loved brand, beyond a liked brand,” he said.

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