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Returning Olympics To Beijing Gives Sponsors Another Opportunity To Break In China

By **Ben Fischer**, Staff Writer

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The '22 Beijing Games offer the business world a second dose of what the '08 Games delivered: An extraordinary opportunity to crack into the world's largest market combined with a political problem. The IOC narrowly voted to award the '22 Games to the Chinese capital on Friday, making it the first city to host both the summer and winter games. China's economic clout was central to the Chinese bid committee's sales pitch, and sponsors and the winter sports industry are eager to get involved, experts said. "China can move markets," said former Visa Head of Sponsorship Marketing Michael Lynch. "And games sponsorship provides access to the highest officials in the Chinese government, which you need in order to continue to do business in China." Sponsors breathed a sigh of relief when the IOC vote was announced, said Rob Prazmark, an Olympic sponsorship sales veteran and partner at 21 Sports & Entertainment Marketing. After several European cities withdrew their bids, the final vote was down to Beijing (population 19.6 million) and Almaty, Kazakhstan (1.4 million). Beijing won 44-40 despite entering the day as a heavy favorite. "You'd rather be in Beijing rather than whatever that other place was," said Prazmark, adding that his client Johnson & Johnson did "phenomenally well" in China during the '08 Games and many others did too.

HUMAN RIGHTS GROUPS UPSET: Returning to China does come with some baggage. Immediately after the vote, the group Chinese Human Rights Defenders began attacking the IOC on Twitter for awarding the games to Beijing despite a recent, severe crackdown on dissidents. "Such a government is clearly unfit to stage the Winter Olympics," reads a letter sent to IOC members before the vote. The IOC's new Agenda 2020 campaign, which claims to prioritize human rights, will help sponsors address these issues if they arise, Lynch said. "The Olympics have always been viewed as a catalyst for change," Lynch said. The group says China did not live up to promises it made during the run-up to the 2008 games to improve its human rights record.

BOON TO WINTER SPORTS: The winter sports industry may be particularly excited. China has made a national priority to develop a largely non-existent winter sports culture, building ski resorts for the wealthy and investing heavily in its Winter Olympics program. In celebrating the win, Beijing Mayor Wang Anshun said the games will "help popularize winter sport among 300 million young people." "We've seen interest and TV gains with snowboarding and freestyle in China," said U.S. Ski & Snowboarding Association CMO Mike Jaquet.

“Biggest growth potential for those sports for sure.” Sponsors were particularly successful in Beijing seven years ago because of how tightly the government controls the Olympic operations and how receptive consumers are to a sign of approval from an authoritarian state. “When someone sees the Beijing Olympic logo on packages, the majority of citizens say, ‘that is good, the government must have approved it, I’m going to buy that,’” Prazmark said. Beijing will be the third consecutive Games held in the Far East, following PyeongChang in ’18 and Tokyo in ’20. That translates into likely further successes for the Japanese advertising giant Dentsu, which is already deeply involved in the Tokyo Games and recently won broadcast rights through '24 in 22 Asian countries, Prazmark said.

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