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**TOYOTA
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OLYMPICS:
LOCALIZING
A GLOBAL
CAMPAIGN**

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TOYOTA AT THE OLYMPICS: LOCALIZING A GLOBAL CAMPAIGN

Toyota tweaked its worldwide games sponsorship to make it resonate regionally in California

Category:
Sports marketing

Vertical market:
Automotive

Agency:
H&L Partners

Initiative:
Squaw Valley

Timing:
Winter 2018

The Marketing Challenge

Toyota kicked off its massive global Olympic sponsorship starting with the 2018 Winter Games in South Korea. The deal with the International Olympic Committee makes the automaker the official “mobility” sponsor for the games through the 2024 Summer Olympics in Paris. The pact, which was reportedly worth \$1 billion when it was signed in 2015, amounts to a major bet on the games by the Japanese automaker for years to come.

It’s no surprise, then, that Toyota went all-in, unleashing its first-ever global campaign during the games. The effort, by Saatchi & Saatchi and Dentsu, was called “Start Your Impossible.” It featured ads meant to plug the company as a mobility solutions provider whose goods and services extend beyond cars to include technologies like wearable robotic leg braces.

Back in the U.S., the challenge was to take Olympic sponsorship and make it relevant in local markets. This case study looks at how the Northern California Toyota Dealers worked with San Francisco-based agency H&L Partners to get that job done.

“Toyota came to us and challenged us that, ‘We are going to make this unprecedented investment in the Olympics and we would like you to do everything you can to tie in locally,’” says Steve Cornelius, owner of Stevens Creek Toyota in San Jose, and the president of the Northern California Toyota Dealers’ Advertising Association. “The challenge was, do we connect the dots ... other than just putting ‘Toyota proud sponsor of the Olympics’ at

At toyotawintergames.com, there is video of Moseley skiing.





H&L Partners mixed archival footage of the 1960 Olympics at Squaw Valley with a present-day look through the eyes of local Olympian Jonny Moseley.

the end of various different commercials,” says Trey Curtola, executive VP at H&L Partners.

The insight

The Northern California dealers’ association covers a massive area, with 63 dealerships from south of Fresno, north to Ukiah and including the Bay Area. The region is, of course, home to icons like the Golden Gate Bridge. But when it comes to Winter Olympics lore, Squaw Valley in Lake Tahoe stands tall. The ski resort hosted the 1960 games, known for the Olympic debut of the men’s biathlon and women’s speed skating, among other feats.

Northern California is also linked to Jonny Moseley, who won a gold medal in the mogul freestyle ski competition at the 1998 Winter Olympics. Moseley was born in Puerto Rico but raised south of San Francisco, where he became a local celebrity after his Olympic triumph.

Toyota had preexisting relationships with Squaw Valley and Moseley. The brand sponsors the ski resort, giving free lift tickets to clients and customers in exchange for dedicating some of its ads to plug the resort. And Moseley

was already under contract with the dealers for doing Squaw Valley-related ads. So the automaker made the hometown celebrity and the mountain the centerpiece of its locally focused Olympic campaign. Moseley is “authentic, we let him just be himself,” and Squaw Valley, “for those of us in Northern California, is kind of a mystical place. It’s an amazing mountain,” Cornelius says. “For us, it just felt right for Northern California.”

The campaign fit into the dealers’ strategy of balancing hard-hitting sales-based ads with more emotional marketing connecting the vehicles to the region. “You just can’t scream at people ‘zero percent financing, \$2,000 cash back’ 12 months a year and expect them to have any feeling about your brand. There is a time and place for that, but it’s not in-your-face all the time,” Cornelius says.

The campaign

In TV ads, Toyota drew on the Olympic heritage of Squaw Valley, showing Moseley cruising through the resort in Toyota vehicles as he recalls key moments and trivia from the 1960 games. He points out that it was the first



Jonny Moseley takes viewers on a tour of Squaw Valley including the first indoor Olympic ice rink and the longest chair lift anyone had seen at the time.

games in which a skier won a medal on metal skis instead of the traditional wooden skis. He also mentions that Squaw Valley built the first indoor Olympic ice rink and “the longest chair lift anyone had ever seen.”

The ads mixed in archival footage, a task that was easier said than done, considering the stranglehold the International Olympic Committee has over its intellectual property. “They are very strict,” Cornelius says. “For instance, Squaw Valley had footage archived of the 1960 Olympics. We could not use that. We had to go to the IOC’s library and find the same footage to be able to use it. That’s how tight they are.”

One ad scene shows speed skaters. But because it would be nearly impossible to track them all down, the dealers were careful to avoid close-up shots. That way, they avoided tricky situations where the athletes could demand payment for using images of their likenesses.

The Toyota dealers also created a microsite, toyotawintergames.com. Content includes a 360-degree video of current-day Moseley skiing Squaw Valley. A camera

mounted from his head shows extreme close-ups as he speeds down the hill. In another video, he gives skiing tips.

Mosley was at the games in South Korea acting as freestyle skiing analyst for NBC. While there, he was active on social media and drove followers to the Toyota website. The dealers also ran 15-second TV spots pointing viewers to the site.

The ad themes diverted from Toyota’s global push and tagline, “Start Your Impossible,” which leaned heavily into broader mobility solutions. While Toyota corporate approved the local work, it did not use a heavy hand. “We didn’t want to completely go against [‘Start Your Impossible’], of course, but our main goal was to bring it alive locally, so we just ran in that direction,” Curtola says. With the local ads, Toyota plugged into the brand’s longtime ethos that “there is no best, only better” by spotlighting athletic feats.

The dealers extended their campaign on the ground to local dealerships, using signage. Up at Squaw Valley, vehicles were wrapped in branding that directed people to the website.

The results*

- **February market share in Northern California increased 0.6 percentage points to an 18.6 percent share.** That marks the highest market share in the market for all autos, and highest share increase in the market.
- **Online Toyota mentions in Northern California reached a 12-month peak** during the Olympic advertising (growing 45 percent).
- **Toyota was the most-recognized** auto brand in the Olympics.

* according to H&L and Toyota

Cornelius says the social media feedback was extremely positive. “For me, that’s all I need to hear,” he says. “If you are thinking about my product enough and the message we just sent you to actually go on social media and say something positive, I think you’re really getting the feedback you want.”

Next steps

The South Korea games marked the beginning of Toyota’s sponsorship. Planning is now underway for the 2020 summer games in Tokyo, which is, of course, Toyota’s global home. In Northern California, the dealers will seek to replicate their local strategy. Of course, there is not a historical Summer Olympics venue in the region along the lines of Squaw Valley. But the dealers and their agency are actively canvassing former Olympic athletes with ties to the region in hopes of signing them up for the next campaign.

“This is just us getting warmed up. We’ll be doing a lot more of this exact type of marketing where we use Northern California athletes and tie them into the Olympics,” Cornelius says. “We are really just talking to athletes and sometimes a story just presents itself.”

One person who will likely be used is Stanford alum and 1992 Olympic medalist Summer Sanders, who was born and raised in Northern California. On her Twitter page, she describes herself as “always a Cali girl.” The dealers actually used her in conjunction with the 2016 summer games in Brazil, running a site called summersgames.com. But they had to tiptoe around trademark issues because Toyota was not an Olympic sponsor at the time. “The

next time around, we’ll be able to do a lot more like we did with Jonny,” Curtola says.

Marketing lessons

Focus your investment

Yes, the ratings for the Winter Olympics were down, coming in as the least-watched Games in U.S. television history, according to media reports. But the Toyota dealers still consider their campaign a hit. “This was an example of a way to really capture attention in the marketplace by going big and investing big in the media where eyeballs are,” Curtola says. “We all know the ratings for the Olympics were down, but we all know there were more people watching the Olympics than anything else.” The key for local campaigns, he says, is “not trying to be everywhere to everybody.” In San Francisco alone, the dealers ran more than 450 commercials during the two-week period.

Relevant creative matters

The dealers could have easily taken Toyota’s national ads and slapped a local bumper on the end of them. Instead, they invested time and money into making the ads relevant to their local audience. The extra work paid off because the brand was able to connect emotionally with viewers. “If it’s possible to leverage an existing local brand, whether it’s a person or place, like we ended up having, it validates your connection to that sponsorship tenfold,” Curtola says. “Without Jonny and without Squaw Valley, you’ve got one arm tied behind your back.’

Practice patience

It took a lot of effort and back-and-forth with the International Olympic Committee to secure the historical footage. The Toyota dealers could have gotten frustrated and given up. But they stuck with it and it paid off because the footage in the ads stands out, and gives viewers a reason to watch.

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