Competing for attention: Using stakeholder engagement to shift the focus from the Beijing Olympics to minority pressure groups

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Abstract

This is a case study, highlighting China's plight to secure consistent, positive media coverage in the lead up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics. While this paper is neither anti-China nor pro-Tibetan, it highlights that large organisations and governments can learn from activist and pressure groups, which have become increasingly successful in engaging stakeholders. The author argues that Olympic marketing programs have focused too much on traditional marketing tools, whilst ignoring the importance of integrated communication programs and stakeholder engagement.

Introduction

The Olympic Games are one of the biggest events on the global sport and entertainment calendar, mesmerising athletes and couch potatoes alike. As far as brands are concerned, there is hardly any bigger and more recognisable than the Olympic Brand. However, in the lead up to the 2008 Olympic Games activist and human rights groups effectively managed to use the global attention and focus on China to raise awareness of their own cause and humanitarian issues in Taiwan, Darfur and Tibet. Whilst the Beijing Organising Committee (BOCOG) was busy promoting the "Torch of Freedom's" longest ever journey around the globe, the David vs. Goliath battle for media attention was arguably won by the Free Tibet Movement (FTM), depicting the torch relay's climb to Mount Everest as a symbol of China's suppression of minority groups. This case study highlights how the Internet and new technologies have arguably levelled the playing field between activist groups and grassroots movements on one hand, and large organisations and governments on the other. The BOCOG, like many old school management teams, did overestimate their control over desired messages and predominantly relied on large marketing budgets and propaganda. While large organisations and governments have largely failed to embrace new media, innovative communication channels and stakeholder engagement, pressure groups' innovative tools and techniques may provide new insights into how to communicate effectively with large or even global audiences.

Activism | Literature Review

Public relations literature refers to activists as "collections of individuals organized to exert pressure on an organization on behalf of a cause"(Grunig, 1992, p. 504). According to Olson's theory of collective action, (these) small interest groups can be more effective than larger and more established groups (Olson, 1965). Ultimately, any activist group's success depends on their ability to access power resources, such as followers, funding, public support, media coverage and political champions (Heath, 1997). Rather than posing a threat, the Excellence Research project suggests that by being forced to interact with activist groups, organsiations are provided with an opportunity to develop truly excellent and effective communication departments (Grunig, 1992), embracing two-way stakeholder communication

and exchange (Heath, 1998). However, scholarly research into activism has traditionally been undertaken from a corporate perspective (Grunig, 1992; Reber & Kim, 2006), with a focus on damage limitation (Heath, 1998; Holtz, 2002; Karagianni & Cornelissen, 2006; Smith & Ferguson, 2001) rather than interaction. Nevertheless, activist and pressure groups have been faster than corporate communicators to adopt online opportunities (Bunting & Lipski, 2001). Previously, the fundraising and recruitment process was a time and resources consuming exercise, including the tedious job of handing out leaflets on street corners and waiting for a handful of sympathetic individuals to respond. The online environment has changed the process, allowing to recruit support within a matter of hours beyond traditional boundaries and restrictions (Holtz, 2002).

Stakeholder theory underlies much of the current thinking and research in management and consequently public relations. An organisation's success depends on its ability to manage the often conflicting demands of its various stakeholder groups. However, based on classification systems such as Mitchell, Agle and Wood's (1997) tri-dimensional approach, or Johnson, Scholes and Whittington's (2006) Power/Interest Matrix, activist groups have traditionally been placed in the less powerful stakeholder categories. However, new communication technologies, such as the Internet, have arguably helped level the power imbalance between activists and large organisations (Coombs, 1998; Heath, 1998; Jaques, 2006) and have thereby enabled activist groups to become more effective and powerful than ever before (Blood, 2001). Activists have long been recognised for being highly effective at employing traditional public relations strategies and tactics (Reber & Berger, 2005). However, the reduction in constraints on geography, access, time and resources have effectively reduced the significance of corporate assets and made it easier for all stakeholders to communicate independently (Bunting & Lipski, 2001).

The Internet provides a low cost, direct, controllable communication channel (Coombs, 1998), which is faster than daily newspapers and more interactive than broadcast media (McCaughey & Ayers, 2003). Furthermore, it provides pressure groups with a low cost tool enabling direct contact with other stakeholders without relying on media gatekeepers (Holtz, 2002). As pressure groups are becoming more sophisticated, research has indicated a convergence between tools and techniques of activism and business disciplines, such as issues management (Jaques, 2006). Whilst research into activist websites highlights at a lack of dialogic features of use to journalists (Reber & Kim, 2006), it has emphasised those available for the general public (Taylor, Kent, & White, 2001). The Internet played a central role in the campaign by the Free Burma Coalition during 1993 to 1997, which eventually pressured PepsiCo into leaving Burma, "thereby reducing the foreign investment capital used to help support the highly repressive SLORC dictatorship in Myanmar" (Coombs, 1998, p. 296). Whilst their efforts were traditionally restricted to discussion groups and emails, activist campaigns are becoming more creative, endorsing interactive communication channels provided by Web2.0 technology, as demonstrated in Greenpeace's 2008 "Dove Onslaught(er)" campaign against deforestation in Indonesia. Rutherford's (2000) case study about the International Mine Ban Treaty furthermore showcases how the Internet can help pressure groups to increase their capabilities by forming international coalitions.

The Olympic Spirit

This study analyses the activities by the Free Tibet Movement (FTM) in the lead up to the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing, highlighting how a group of activist organisations

effectively managed to use the global spotlight on China to raise awareness of their own cause.

Despite earlier struggles, the Olympic Games have developed into one of the world's most recognisable global brands, and a key event on the international sporting and events calendar (Amis & Cornwell, 2005), anticipated by athletes, sport enthusiast and coach potatoes alike. Olympic Games marketing programs are highly sophisticated, rising billions of dollars from international sponsorship deals, broadcasting partners, licensing and ticket sales (International Olympic Committee, 2001b). Benefits for local host are also apparent, with a significant impact on tourism (International Olympic Committee, 2001a). Attributes most closely associated with the Olympic image are positive, emotional and aspirational; such as being the best, trustworthy, inspirational, peaceful, honourable, participation and striving (International Olympic Committee, 2001a, p. 9). One of the most powerful symbols for the Olympic spirit is the Olympic torch, representing freedom, a lack of cultural barriers and harmony. The symbol of the torch arguably highlights one of the key reasons why China was eager to host the 2008 Olympic Games, not motivated by financial gain, but by the opportunity to showcase the "new China", aligned with the Olympic attributes (Clifford, 2008). However, instead of celebrating China's year in the spotlight, the lead up to the Olympics was overshadowed by growing calls for boycotts of the 2008 games, in protest against China's poor human rights record and in response to recent disturbances in Tibet, Darfur and Taiwan, going as far as calling for a complete boycott of Chinese goods ("Friends of Tibet India,").

The Olympic Games are not new to criticism, controversy and negative connotations, most commonly relating to perceived commercialism and the politicising of the event itself (Lenskyj, 2000; Roche, 2002). Politics have frequently played a major part in Olympic Games, most notoriously during the 1936 summer Olympics in Berlin, which were used as a propaganda tool by the German Nazi Party. The Olympic Games are equally not new to activist involvement and pressure groups. During the 1972 Munich games - intended to present a new, democratic and optimistic Germany to the world - 11 Israeli athletes were killed by Palestinian terrorists. Eight years later, 65 athletes refused to compete at the Moscow Olympics, countered by further boycotts of the 1984 Olympic Games (Senn, 1999). As a result, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) has been working hard to establish the Olympics as a neutral event, celebrating unity, peace and inspiration. The torch continues to be upheld as symbol of freedom and the Olympic spirit.

2008 Beijing Olympics | One World One Dream

On 13th July 2001, Beijing was awarded the right to host the 2008 Olympic Games, as only the third Asian summer location after Tokyo in 1964 and Seoul in 1988 (Pollock, Kreuer, & Ouano, 1997). However, this was not China's first attempt at becoming an Olympic host. Its 1991 application to sponsor he 27th Olympics failed, amid concerns by the Olympic committee that China would not be able to guarantee uncensored media access, the right to protest and general freedom of expression. For its second attempt Beijing recruited professional advice in the form of Weber Shandwick, a leading global public relations firm (Clifford, 2008), which claims winning the bid for the 2008 games by separating China's "human rights record from its Olympic bid" (David Liu, Managing Director for Weber Shandwick China, quoted in: Clifford, 2008). The rationale was that by thrusting China into the International spotlight, China would be forced to engage with the rest of the world. Secretary-general of the Beijing bid organizing committee, Wang Wei, stated in Moscow that a "nod for Beijing would mean enhancement [in China] in education, medical benefits, as

well as human rights"(quoted in: Lam, 2001). He furthermore pledged there would be no restrictions on foreign press, covering the event.

However, Chinese coverage during the lead up to the Olympic Games made it very clear that while China strived to be associated with the Olympic symbolism of unity, freedom and peace, it was not prepared to accept any criticism. Hosting the Games was an issue of national pride. An impressive amount of resources was made available for new infrastructure and the smooth running of the games. The Beijing Government was determined that nobody would be able to threaten its pride nor the Olympic Spirit (Hutzler, 2007; The Beijing Organizing Committee, 2008). Consequently, any 'politicising' of the 2008 Games was automatically condemned. The Olympics were seen as a showcase for the "new China", characterised by the economic boom and poverty reduction, but they developed into a magnet for protesters and critics of the Chinese government, which closely controls political organisations and protest in the country (Dyer & McGregor, 2008). In the lead up to the Olympics the media largely focused on China's poor human rights track record, particularly in Taiwan, Darfur and mostly in Tibet. This perceived Western media bias was highly criticised by China (Dyer & McGregor, 2008) and in return resulted in demonstrations (Bachelor, 2008) and even boycotts around the world ("Carrefour sees Chinese boycott over Tibet," 2008).

Free Tibet | A window of opportunity

In contrast to China's strong position as resources rich Olympic host, the Free Tibet Movement's (FTM) fight was seemingly lost the moment Beijing's endorsement as 2008 Olympic host was announced. After decades of campaigning for Tibet's self-determination (Bob, 2005), the announcement came as a big 'blow'. Worldwide there is a large array of organisations supporting Tibet's independence in one form or another. 153 of these are currently listed as members of the London-based International Tibet Support Network. As for the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (Rutherford, 2000), the coalition provides these groups with a global platform and opportunities that would otherwise not be available due to their limited funds, heavy dependency on individual donations and consequently their reliance on media coverage to ensure their voice is being heard. The initial focus of the various groups was on preventing the Olympic Games from being awarded to China. However, after an initial period of disbelief and disappointment the movement realised that a unique opportunity was presenting itself as China was being thrust into the global spotlight. "At first there was a profound sense of despair after the Chinese government was awarded the honor," said Kalaya'an Mendoza, a coordinator for Students for a Free Tibet (SFT) (quoted in: Clifford, 2008). "But after five minutes passed, we realized this would be a monumental opportunity for the Tibetan people to be put in the international spotlight."

The Chinese government effectively underestimated the FTM's strategic planning capabilities and endurance. No sooner as Beijing was announced as the 2008 Olympic host, Tibet support groups around the world held a series of public relations strategy sessions (Clifford, 2008; Saunders, 2008). Like other NGOs, pressure and activist groups, the FTM has become increasingly strategic and sophisticated, not just in their techniques but also in their planning capabilities (Bob, 2005; Guiniven, 2002; Reber & Kim, 2006). The FTM found itself in a weak and disadvantages position, lacking not only funds, but being furthermore based outside Tibet, with a large following of non-Tibeteans, which could have easily undermined their credibility. However, the FTM managed to be heard by engaging their global audience, with the help of new communication technologies.

The BOCOG also recognised the Internet as a major communications tool, creating sleek, information rich websites with up to date news, a count down to the Games, weather updates, photos, discipline specific information and ticketing details. However, it effectively failed to encourage any engagement with its global audience. In direct contrast to this, the FTM deliberately played out its campaign in the public domain. One of the most visible groups has been the Students for a Free Tibet (SFT). The New York based organisation has 650 chapters worldwide, and a highly visible leadership team, including Lhadon Tethong, its ethnic Tibetan, Canadian born Director. SFT is a perfect example of a PR savvy activist organisation (Reber & Berger, 2005). As a student focused organisation, SFT is surprisingly sophisticated and strategic. The SFT website itself provides a comprehensive guide to successful campaigning, including advice on creating strategic campaigns, media training and action ideas. The groups also offers internships and organises bi-annual, week-long "action camps", including workshops on grassroots fundraising, media training, political theatre and campaign planning (including site management) (Clifford, 2008). Additionally, SFT has fully endorsed the Internet as a low-cost communication channel (Coombs, 1998) and has effectively expanded its dialogic features (Taylor et al., 2001). Throughout the campaign, Lhadon was highly visible via her personal blog (http://beijingwideopen.org/) , phone-in interviews from IOC meetings, YouTube recordings of media conferences, live streaming from important events and via international media coverage (broadcast and print). Similarly, email alerts to SFT supporters were personalised and went beyond plain text, including images, links to past coverage, supporting profiles, video footage and photos of recent campaigns. Alerts also usually contained a call to action, ranging from recruiting an "Olympic Athlete to Stand up for Tibet in Beijing", to contacting the local IOC representative, or signing a petition aimed at torch relay sponsors. Feedback and interaction have been encouraged and are not censored, apart from peer ratings and comments on YouTube. SFT have also increasingly been using social networking sites such as Facebook, text messages, emails and bulletins to organise themselves at their various protest locations.

Unlike many other likeminded groups, SFT have not solely relied on generating media coverage. Instead, the group has effectively used new technologies to devise strategic campaigns which enable direct engagement with other stakeholders (Holtz, 2002), such as key Olympic sponsors and partners (Branigan & Kelso, 2008; "McDonald to the protester target," 2008), as well as IOC officials. By targeting these groups directly, SFT did not only make its voice heard, it effectively turned the traditional stakeholder map on its head. With the aid of new media and stakeholder engagement SFT won not only the battle for media coverage, but also for public sympathy, at the expense of the Olympic Games' historical values. With the aid of a sophisticated campaign and imagery, the 'Torch of Freedom' was effectively turned into a symbol of suppression.

Conclusion

Activist groups and grassroots movements have traditionally been placed in the less powerful stakeholder categories. However, this case study highlights how with the emergence of the Internet and particularly Web2.0 technology groups like the FTM have moved their focus beyond their role as dependent stakeholder. Instead, they have increasingly shifted their attention towards their own stakeholders and (global) recruitment of supporters. As a result, the traditional organisation-stakeholder relationship has arguably been turned on its head and the BOCOG's stakeholder map re-arranged. Findings of this case study cannot be generalised to other activist groups beyond Students for a Free Tibet. However, this paper aims to provide valuable insights for large organisations and governments in their quest to engage stakeholders and to effectively communicate their vision and values. The FTM have

demonstrated how with the aid of new technologies and sophisticated stakeholder communication a resource-poor activist group can effectively shift the focus from a global, mainstream event to a largely offbeat, humanitarian cause.

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