

# FP MARKETING

## Being a brand

To get support and sponsorship dollars, an athlete can no longer be just an athlete

By **HOLLIE SHAW**

What's an amateur athlete worth these days? In marketing terms, winning competitions in your sport is only a small piece of the equation.

In an era of marketing frugality, when corporate sponsorships at all levels are being cut or heavily scrutinized, an athlete's exercise in personal branding — building up a fan base by touring community events and going viral — is becoming as integral a part of the weekly routine as squeezing in long hours of training.

The most pressing issue for athletes now is fundraising, says Canadian snowboarder Jeff Batchelor, silver medallist at the 2009 world championships. Speaking during a recent panel discussion at a Canadian Marketing Association conference looking at the value of the upcoming Vancouver 2010 Games, the athlete said travel and training budgets for snowboarders are especially lean in recessionary times.

Industry giants such as Burton Snowboards Inc., for example, are making cuts to the number of athletes they sponsor on their global teams.

To carve out a marketable identity, Mr. Batchelor said, athletes need to

define themselves as personal brands in addition to winning competitions, and must go “above and beyond” what they did a few years ago to be noticed and supported.

“Without a decipherable personal brand image, you're just another athlete,” he said. “[The] companies that are out there looking for marketing opportunities are not looking for just another athlete.

“By investing dollars in that athlete, they are making a bet that they will bring home gold, as well as high returns on their invested dollars. In an economic downturn, consumers want the best for what they pay for, and let's face it, nobody is going to buy Wheaties from the guy who came in second place.”

The snowboarder promotes his own brand on a website and blog, JeffBatchelor.com, which documents his life in competition through a blog and photographs. “I started my website to keep my friends back home in on what I'm doing and then it turned out to be a way to allow companies to see what I'm all about.”

While Mr. Batchelor said he did not set out to create a specific image to win more corporate sponsors — other than “try[ing] to make [the website] look really cool” — he admitted he has had “to sort of tame the snowboard style and lingo” on the site to have a broader appeal to marketers.

Beyond websites, an athlete can drum up a bigger fan base and public awareness by pressing the flesh, as they say in the world of politics, at a wide variety of social and community events tied to the Games and key sponsors such as Hudson's Bay Co.

The retailer, a national Games sponsor that designed Team Canada's uniforms and sponsors 200 Canadian athletes in its Olympic program, believes increasing the athletes' public profiles can help ultimately to sell clothes, said Mark Kinnin, the company's vice-president of global sourcing at the Olympics, corporate sales and e-retail.

“If the athletes don't do well, I don't get a return [on the marketing investment],” he said. “But if people don't know who the athletes are, I also don't get a return.”

To that end, Hudson's Bay, one of Mr. Batchelor's sponsors, organizes events to bring athletes across the country to do events with Canadians, such as pop-up street hockey games.

“Until you've seen a kid go up to an athlete and touch their medal ... they have stars in their eyes. If I can help the athlete do what they do, if I can help them win more gold, I can help them get more connected to Canadians, we are all going to benefit,” Mr. Kinnin said.

People like to compete with athletes at events that do not highlight an athlete's expertise, he said. They get a thrill from trying to “beat them at something, like a video game.”

Indeed, the presence of athletes at public events helps raise a lot of

money for amateur sports, said David Bedford, executive director of the Canadian Olympic Committee. “Athletes are the kind of people that corporate citizens will pay money to go meet. We use our annual golf tournaments to raise money for the athletes, and they sell out every year.”

Such grassroots marketing efforts have been a big asset in the recession, he said. While the revenue base from licensing and sponsorships tied to the Olympics is agreed upon far in advance and pretty much guaranteed, the downturn forced the com-

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mittee to cut its budget by \$17.9-million. “We are hopeful that the market continues to grow over the next couple of years,” Mr. Bedford said.

In addition to sponsorships, the Winter Games' operating budget of \$1.62-billion is funded by sales of tickets and merchandise.

The price tag for Olympic sponsors is hefty: Global sponsors pay an estimated US\$80-million for the top tier, and several global sponsors of the

Beijing 2008 Olympic Games did not renew for Vancouver, including Johnson & Johnson, Manulife Financial Corp., Lenovo Group Ltd. and Eastman Kodak Co. But official sponsors like Samsung Electronics Co. insist the high price tag is worth it for the prestige.

“Olympic marketing has played a very important role in building up the company's corporate image,” said Gye Hyun Kwon, head of worldwide sport marketing at Samsung, saying it helped to cement the Korean company's image in the competitive electronics field as a trusted brand.

“The Olympic movement is the most premium spot among all sport platforms. Our position is very clear in the case of Olympic Games. We believe it's really silly to abandon the platform; we have to take full advantage of the platform.”

Nevertheless, Samsung does not invest in specific athletes, perhaps wanting to steer clear of the risk of loss, injury and other behavioural gaffes — witness the Michael Phelps bong scandal and the resulting fallout, including Kellogg Co. dropping the athlete as a spokesman.

“We stopped; it's too risky,” said Mr. Kwon. “They have to perform well, and if we sponsor one very good player and the next day they go down, we lose all of our investment. It's very risky.”

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### AD MISSIONS

## Images are inspiring, voiceover is grand, but we're sure not reinventing GM



The “reinvention” of General Motors Corp. has been touted in this heavily circulated viral ad by Deutsch, Los Angeles, and has been tweaked for the Canadian market by MacLaren McCann, removing its overtly American references. Is the Ad Missions crew buying what GM's selling?

**Andrew Potter** is a *Maclean's* columnist, an editor at *The Ottawa Citizen* and co-author of *The Rebel Sell: Why the Culture Can't be Jammed*.

This is the kind of campaign that lends credibility to the leftist belief that advertising is essentially fascist. Except as the King of Madison Avenue, David Ogilvie, never tired of pointing out, the iron rule of good advertising is to “tell the truth.” With this, General Motors has entered the realm of what Harry Frankfurt described as “bull----” in his bestselling pamphlet on the subject from a few years ago. Unlike a lie, which at least acknowledges the existence of a truth, this does not even pretend to be in the truth-telling game. This is the most shameful corporate abuse of the public trust in decades.

**Andris Pone** is a Toronto-based brand strategy consultant.

The concept of reinvention is rich with authenticity for GM, allowing us to buy in on several levels. For example, an inventive spirit lies at the heart of U.S. identity and greatness. It's therefore resonant that this archetypal U.S. brand, at this do-or-die moment in its history, should bet its future on a classically U.S. trait. “Reinvention” also suggests this campaign is not a quick fix, but rather connotes “kaizen” (Japanese for “improvement”). But what's with the imagery? What do crowded sidewalks, an injured hockey player, a quarterback throwing a football, and the racetrack have to do with reinvention? These ponderous choices distract from the very believable voiceover.

**Scott Reid** is partner and creative director at Philter Communications Inc.

GM is now, evidently, about reinvention. But what we see in this spot is decidedly a redressing. Oh, the stunning and awe-inspiring visuals: dawn cityscape time-lapse, plant growth, homebuilding and the faces of blue-collar solemnity. American (and by extension North American) culture is inextricably linked to the resonant metaphor of the road — think Steinbeck, Twain — hell, even Springsteen. Yet instead of reconnecting consumers to culture, to something bigger than consumption, GM hopes for us all to marvel at a company whose innovations are today's table stakes. In the United States, stillness is death. Perhaps then GM's misapprehension of its own relevance is appropriate. This spot is equally pleasant and forgettable, with great music. And to me, it positions GM as uncreative, uninspired and sadly uninventive.

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