

PRESIDENT'S LETTER

Olympic Reflections

As the Sochi Bear tearfully and reluctantly blew out the Olympic flame to bring to a close the Sochi Winter Olympic Games, our bi-annual fascination with one of the most visible global events in our industry also came to a close, with more than its fair share of lessons to be shared and learned, no matter the size and scale of your own event.

The first of those being, that we are now living and operating in a completely different world. "We're not in Kansas anymore," as Dorothy so clearly noted in the Wizard of Oz. Never before have we witnessed the impact of such intense, wall-to-wall coverage and scrutiny that our highly-connected world now allows for, encourages and thrives upon. It is a high-def world where every blemish and highlight is shared, commented upon, dissected and second-guessed, often (if not usually) before the event is ever ready to 'officially' announce or release anything on their own. From the planning and operations to security and infrastructure readiness; from participants, politics and programming to mascots, merchandise and media (both coverage and their accommodations); the storylines – controlled and uncontrolled (a lesson unto itself) – were endless.

So, taking a quick, reflective look back, what were a few other important lessons (certainly not all-inclusive) that those of us in the events industry can take away from the Olympic experience?

- **Define Your Story and Be Able to Tell it Clearly, Year-Round**
With the media (social and traditional) obviously clamoring to cover something (anything), and the on-air announcers underlining that Russia had a new story to tell and share, there did not seem to be an abundance of information or storylines

being shared by the Olympic hosts prior to the Opening Ceremonies. As a result, that left open to the media frenzy coverage of almost everything the planners would probably have preferred not be highlighted – threats of terrorist attacks; unfinished venues and infrastructure challenges; political and cause-oriented messaging; the plight of stray dogs and uprooted local residents; torch problems and budget critiques. Not that all of those topics/issues would have been ignored, but without any other balancing stories, we all entered the Olympics able to name more problems than sporting events. In this new world, we must clearly define our own story and keep it out-in-front, year round.

- **None of Us, No Matter the Size of Our Event or Budget, Controls the Weather**
While that may not make you feel any better when your event has been rained out or flooded; or temperatures drop to lows never seen before during your event; or storms require stopping your event to protect your audiences/participants; or warmer than usual temperatures prevent the freezing that your winter event needs; we can all take solace in the reality that no one has figured out how to control the weather (yet).
- **Ensuring the Safety and Security of Our Audiences and Participants Has Become a Prime Directive**
I doubt that we will ever again see a time when our safety concerns can be somewhat compartmentalized to health issues...cuts, scrapes, bee stings, sprained ankles, heart attacks, heat exhaustion, etc....and our ability to respond quickly with medical personnel. Despite our size, location or seemingly innocuous purposes, we must all now ensure that we have taken the necessary steps (working with our cities, law enforcement agencies, insurers and professional associations) to predict, prepare and respond to any situation that could potentially risk or impact



the safety and security of all those who attend or support our events. This should be in a written, easy-to-share and reference, plan.

- **'Stuff' Happens**
Again, no matter your size, budget, preparations, planning, et al., the one certainty is that something will go wrong. We deal with too many variables in our industry for that not to be the case. We are, however, not judged so much by the fact that something does not go as planned, but more so by how we respond to the problem. We all witnessed the fifth Olympic ring that failed to open during the Olympic Opening Ceremonies and cringed in empathy. But kudos, all around, to the producers of the ceremonies (former IFEA World Board Chair Tom Bisignano among them) for their humor in acknowledging that problem and using it as a positive in the Closing Ceremony. *That* will be the story that is remembered and repeated!
- **Politics and Events Don't Mesh; People Still Want to Believe that the World (and Our Communities) Can Come Together for Something Bigger than Ourselves**
As much as there are many political roads that we must maneuver to accomplish our jobs successfully, people attend events to get away from politics and life as usual. The Olympic Games has always flown the flag of being about sport and not

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politics, and yet, the world does not yet seem to be able to allow that to happen. There is always a message to be sent; a cause to be championed; a point to be made. Where a crowd or audience can be drawn, for whatever positive intent, there will always be those who will seek ways to use it for their own purposes. We experience this on a local level and all the way through to the international level. And while we will not likely see an end to it any time soon, we must still strive to provide events and opportunities that allow people to come together to celebrate both our similarities and our differences; our victories and our common visions. It is that feeling of being a part of the same thing (sharing common ground) that will allow us to find solutions to our other concerns.

- **Talk to Targeted Audiences with Targeted Mediums**

In a world with many, many levels of audiences, all of whom have their chosen/preferred sources/methods of communicating and experiencing events, let's try to avoid lowering the experience for any of them by attempting to cross over all of our possibilities. We don't need to fill traditional television coverage by sharing tweets that are meaningless. The peo-

ple who want to tweet will do so on their own. We don't need to remind newspaper readers of all the information they are not getting by not being on-line. It diminishes the value of the media they are subscribers to. We shouldn't have to have a television announcer explain the storyline of a live performance. Who is explaining it to the live audience? And we should all begin to encourage that those opinions without an identifiable source, presented in a credible and respectful format, via any medium, don't count.

- **People Understand and Appreciate Quality and Creativity**

Whether you are the Olympic Games or the local Children's Festival, audiences, media, sponsors, volunteers, and cities appreciate and recognize quality and creativity. From decorations to mascots; fireworks to medal presentations; media coverage to advertising; infrastructure to programming; customer service to the professionalism of your staff and team, the level of quality and creativity that you commit your own events to will make you stand out from the crowd. These are the foundations of your brand and image. When people think of the Olympics, they already have

a pre-conceived expectation in their mind; an expectation that draws their support, their resources and their return. Make sure that your events provide those same expectations.

- **The True Power of Events Comes When People and Participants take Ownership**

Despite the many problems, hurdles, and challenges faced by the Sochi Olympics, at the conclusion of the games everyone involved – competitors, volunteers, viewers, sponsors, media, et al. – had taken 'ownership' of the event. At that point – when all had shared a common event experience - all the problems were forgiven, accolades were flowing, highlight reels were running, memories had been formed and all were looking forward to the next gathering in Pyeongchang, South Korea (2018 Winter Games) or Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (2016 Summer Games). If we use our events, wherever they may be, to provide a common bonding experience for our 'communities,' the true power of events will lay the foundation for future successes and visions.

Here's to a gold medal showing for all of your events!