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Was Li Ning the Ultimate Ambush?

[Adidas May Be the Sponsor But a Home Team Player Stole the Show](#)

Posted by [Greg Paull](#) on 08.10.08 @ 09:28 AM



Greg Paull

Imagine your competitor beats you to the official Olympic sponsorship in your home country. That's really tough to take -- and you need to think of an ambush strategy to fight back.

In a closed bid three years ago between the "big three" of the sports category, Adidas grabbed the gold and the official status that comes with Olympic sponsorship.

The two losers retaliated with years of aggressive behavior. Nike signed up all but a handful of China's national Olympic teams. To improve its global credentials, local upstart Li Ning invested in Shaq, an NBA star popular in China, as well as the Argentinean, Swedish and Spanish national Olympic teams.

Neither had the official rights that belonged to Adidas. The German sports company has tried its darndest to use its Olympic advantage with an outstanding 10-month ad campaign launched at the end of last year. It also successfully linked its brand to some of China's best athletes such as Chinese diving sensation Hu Jia, basketball superstar Sui Feifei and soccer legend Zheng Zhi.

In research by my company, R3, and CSM, Adidas consistently improved in promotional recall and brand values over the past two years. It supported the campaign with a lot of integrated and activation pieces, along with opening its largest store in the world in Beijing a month before the games.

How could home player Li Ning respond? Well, how about getting your chairman to fly around the Bird's Nest with a torch in front of 2 billion global viewers in the culmination of the greatest single ceremony any of us have ever seen -- and may ever see. Li Ning was selected as the final torchbearer in Friday's opening ceremony because he won six medals in gymnastics at the 1984 Olympic Games in Los Angeles. His success turned him into China's first sports celebrity and he is still one of the country's most beloved athletes.

Until our next wave of fieldwork, we won't know the results of the link between Li Ning the man, Li Ning the brand and Chinese consumers' likely intent to purchase Li Ning products as a result of his turn as a torchbearer. But we anticipate it will be significant.

And what of poor Adidas, investing in a sponsorship only to see the enemy flying in the face of it? Because Nike has locked up champion hurdler Liu Xiang and local



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sports teams and Li Ning is a local brand with a natural inside track, I think the bigger question for Adidas is, Where would they be without the sponsorship?

In the end, despite the "floating ambush" of the opening ceremony, Adidas has forged an important position in the Chinese market through its Olympic investment, one that would have been tough to achieve without the property. And hey, don't forget all Chinese athletes last night were wearing Adidas -- including Li Ning!

As a final oddity, below is Li Ning's Wikipedia entry at 9 p.m. last night, well before the opening ceremony ended.

Li Ning
From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

This is a Chinese name; the family name is Li.

Li Ning (Simplified Chinese: 李宁, Traditional Chinese: 李寧, Pinyin: Lǐ Níng) is a famous Chinese gymnast and entrepreneur. He was born in a Zhuang family on September 8, 1963 in Luzhou, Guangxi, China and gained his Bachelor of Law and EMBA degrees from Peking University.

Ning is most famous for winning 6 medals at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics, including 3 gold medals (in floor exercise, pommel horse, and rings), 2 silver medals, and a bronze medal. In 1992, he won six of the seven medals awarded at the Sixth World Cup Gymnastic Competition, earning him the title "Prince of gymnastics".

Ning retired from sporting competition in 1988, and in 1990 he founded the Li-Ning Company Limited, which sells footwear and sporting apparel in China. Ning remains chairman of the company's board of directors.

Li was inducted into the International Gymnastics Hall of Fame in 2000. He became the first Chinese inductee of the International Gymnastics Hall of Fame.^[1]

In Beijing 2008 Olympics Li Ning was named to be the person to ignite the cauldron at the opening ceremony.^[2]

References

Li Ning's Wikipedia site on Aug. 8 -- before the end of the opening ceremonies

As you can see, it said Li Ning had already been announced as the final torchbearer. And here was I thinking there were still secrets in China ...

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