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27 July 2006

Sponsors and brands hoping to capitalise on the 2008 Beijing Olympics are taking a fresh look at their options. By Jo Bowman

As the Beijing Olympics draw closer, brands aligned with the event are making their agency partners prove their strength and agility in much the same way as athletes heading for the games are being trained and tested.

Official sponsors of the Games, and Chinese brands that want to make the most of the Olympic opportunity, are reviewing their agency relationships or asking agency partners to sharpen their branding strategies ahead of the Games.

David Shaw, director of marketing at Lenovo Asia-Pacific, the Beijing Olympics' technology equipment sponsor, says that when it comes to brands' association with the Olympics, the stakes are too high to risk getting it wrong, and it's logical that many client marketers will want to test and challenge their advertising agency partners.

"If you get it wrong or don't make the best of it, you've got to wait four more years for another kick at the can -- and you've just blown your Olympic investment," he says.

"I don't think (Olympics planning) is a different kind of work, but it's on a bigger scale, and maybe it's a bit of a catalyst for some companies unsure of whether their agency is up to the mark to make them prove themselves."

Home appliances giant Haier is among the latest to announce a rethink in its strategy, having invited roster agencies Asatsu-DK, Dentsu, FCB and Saatchi & Saatchi to map out a branding programme that could be used both on the mainland and globally.

The group is working to boost sales by 15 per cent this year, and is seeking a considerable lift in foreign sales to help it achieve this.

Haier is one of five national sponsors of the 2008 Games, and sees the relationship with the Olympics as a key part of its plan to be the world's number one white goods brand by the time the torch in Beijing goes out.

Johnson & Johnson, which is sponsoring the Olympics for the first time ever in Beijing, in May chose Ogilvy & Mather to develop a new marketing platform in the lead-up to the Games, after a two-stage pitch that also involved Lowe, McCann Erickson, JWT and TBWA. J&J sees the Games, and the goodwill for the brand that it hopes to create around them, as a once in a lifetime opportunity to reach out to families in China, a vast, lucrative and growing market for the company.

Home-grown sports brand Li-Ning, which failed in its attempt to become an official Games sponsor, is also banking on the event to help boost its profile, and has been putting its creative agency partner to the test. In May, it announced that Leo Burnett had retained the Li-Ning account after a three-way contest for

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the US\$29 million brief.

The Games organisers themselves have also been finalising their agency team in the race for the finish line, with BOCOG (Beijing's Organising Committee for the Games) confirming Hill & Knowlton as its public relations agency.

With the stakes so high, it's understandable that brands working to capitalise on the success of the Beijing Olympics want to make sure they've got the best players on their team.

Lenovo's Shaw says the opportunity for a brand to raise its profile through an event like the Olympics -- both to a domestic Chinese audience and a broader international one -- is tremendous, but he also explains that there is a place and a need for humility.

"You've got to take a step back and remember that people who watch the Olympics Games do so for the Games themselves; sometimes, the sponsors think all eyes are on them, but that's not the case," Shaw says. "The eyes after all are on the athletes."

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