

THE 2010 VANCOUVER WINTER GAMES: A BAROMETER FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

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Since its inception, the Olympic movement has evolved to adapt to the world's – and to consumers' – changing social circumstances. These include the creation of the Winter Games in 1924 due to the increasing popularity of ice and snow sports, and the commercialization of the Games as a result of the rise in importance of mass media. As the 2010 Vancouver Olympic Games approach, how are they – and the events leading up to them – reflective of today's consumer mindset and trends?

1. A low-key affair. The upcoming Games will likely be the most restrained in recent years (with the exception of the Salt Lake Games, which took place just after 9/11). This is no surprise, given the collective mood since the recession began. While consumers have had to re-evaluate all aspects of their lives, looking for value and savings, so have Olympic sponsors. Sponsor activation is measured in comparison to past Games. For example, GE (an Edelman client) was very prominent on the Olympic Green in Beijing with a high-profile pavilion focused on the exciting innovations of the company's Ecomagination program. In Vancouver, their presence is more low key, trading a high-profile pavilion for helping the host province refurbish a downtown Vancouver outdoor skating rink.

2. It's all about engagement, eh? How a brand engages with consumers and the opportunities created for consumers to participate in how it's shaped is what drives a brand's value. The Olympics are no different. Sponsors are bringing engagement to a whole new level with correspondent programs, athlete blogs and the like. Petro-Canada (an Edelman client) has even created a virtual Wave to allow all Canadians – not just those at the Games – to cheer on the athletes.

3. United we stand...for green Games. In early 2009, more than 70 Olympic and professional athletes created a petition urging people to sign it as a way of "encouraging" the 2010 Olympic organizers (VANOC) to stick to their commitment of making the Games carbon-neutral. This initiative was developed in partnership with the David Suzuki Foundation, a leading Canadian environmental organization. By November, with just 100 days to go before the Opening Ceremonies, VANOC announced 25 partners that will invest in the "2010 Carbon Partner Program." To ensure that it delivers on this commitment, athletes have again banded together to create Project Blue Sky, a movement to inspire individuals who care about climate change to contribute one billion kilometers of carbon-reducing activities from their daily lives through the end of the Closing Ceremonies.

4. Historical revival? Given all the uncertainty of the past year, it's no surprise that consumers are seeking to get back in touch with themselves through familiar and comforting means. Enter Hudson Bay Company (an Edelman client), North America's oldest corporation dating back to 1670, and official outfitter of the Canada's 2010 Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games teams. The Olympic clothing line launched in late fall is classic Canadiana, using iconic Canadian symbols like parkas and buffalo plaid, and is meant to celebrate Canada's stories and spirit in a way that is authentically Canadian. The line has been universally embraced by both the fashion community, and more importantly, the masses, who are showing their support at the cash register.

5. Generously supported through consumer ACTIONism. As we've seen through the most recent Edelman Good Purpose study, despite the global recession, consumers still want to support brands that have a social purpose. Case in point: research conducted by the Canadian Olympic Committee a few years ago found that Canadians were looking for easy ways to support Canadian athletes' quest for Olympic gold. In response, VANOC launched a line of red mittens with a retail value of \$10. Four dollars from the sale of each pair goes to support the Canadian Olympic team. Make it easy and they will buy! Since they were unveiled in late September, more than 1 million pairs have been sold (the original target for the program), with a goal of 3 million sold by the end of the Games, translating to \$12 million directly to Canadian athletes.

6. "Now-ism" through citizen journalism. While the majority of us won't be able to experience the spectacle live, the upcoming Games will no doubt satisfy consumers' need for instant gratification and real-time experiences. VANOC has just announced that a media center for bloggers and cell phone videographers without official press credentials will be open throughout the Games. In a release, VANOC stated that the center will promote the "democratization of storytelling" by providing a place for citizen journalists to work. Is it possible that we will suffer from Olympic content overload as a result? Likely not.

As the beginning of the Olympic creed states, "The most important thing in the Olympic Games is not to win but to take part." The evolution of the Games demonstrates just how entrenched "taking part" has truly become not only for the athletes, but for consumers as well.