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New sponsors use 2018 as test run for Tokyo

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IOC President Thomas Bach (right) and Jack Ma, chairman of Chinese e-commerce giant Alibaba Group, celebrate the company's new Olympic partnership in 2017.

Midway through a major evolution in its sponsorship portfolio, the International Olympic Committee is welcoming three new global sponsors at once in Pyeongchang.

That's a double-edged sword for the local Korean organizers and the IOC, who depend on enthusiastic corporate marketers for some of the heavy promotional lifting, said Rob Prazmark, the former IMG executive who sold Olympic sponsorships in the 1990s and 2000s.

"You love first-time sponsors because they're into it — they throw everything at it," Prazmark said. "It's a new, shiny thing and they really, really get behind it. It's getting into the second- or third-contract renewal period that's the most difficult. Then the bloom is off the rose."

On the other hand, they're still learning and likely see the relatively small, relatively obscure Pyeongchang Games as a trial run for the really big show, the 2020 Tokyo Summer Games, where they'll be tested in a much higher-stakes environment.

"It's a smaller Games and they can test their theories, strategies and tactics," Prazmark said, "Because they'll really throttle up for Tokyo, and take their key learnings from Pyeongchang and apply it there. Tokyo is going to be a major, major event. Then you've got Beijing and China, massive market."

The IOC hasn't welcomed multiple new global sponsors at a Winter Games since 2006, when General Electric and Lenovo first started. Much like today, those deals were seen as more focused on the Summer Games two years later in Beijing than the Torino Winter Games in Italy.

The three new sponsors — Toyota, Intel and Alibaba — are each in a different spot. Toyota signed in early 2015 and has had the time to assemble a full-fledged, global marketing campaign to exploit the Olympics, even though it won't be providing cars on the ground.

Even though it signed its sponsorship deal just eight months ago, Intel has scrambled to put together a VIP hospitality program, a showcase at the Gangneung Olympic Park, an esports exhibition and a slate of athlete endorsers, along with a media campaign to promote its technical contributions. But Aicha Evans, its chief strategy officer, says they're trying to stay humble and not over-promise considering how new to the IOC's sponsorship roster they are.

Alibaba has not yet marketed its Olympics deal in the U.S. and declined a request to discuss its campaign in detail prior to a launch in the coming weeks — remarkably late by Olympic sponsor standards. Alibaba's 12-year deal centers around a long-term project to build an Olympic e-commerce site and take over all cloud computing.

So far in China, Alibaba's Tmall e-commerce site hosted an "Online WinterFest" that's offered a sale on thousands of winter sports items from other IOC sponsors. In Korea, it also will have a showcase at Gangneung Olympic Park with a futuristic theme of how Alibaba's cloud computing will improve the Olympics, and it will take the Games as a chance to better develop its identity outside its home Chinese market.

"We look forward to showcasing our brand on a global stage and showing how we'll leverage Alibaba technology and innovations — from cloud to e-commerce — to help transform the future of the Games," said Jennifer Kuperman, Alibaba head of international corporate affairs, in a prepared statement.