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SBJ/July 25-31, 2016/Olympics



McD's about the kids in Rio

IOC allows opening ceremony to be part of activation

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Published July 25, 2016, Page 1

After years of tinkering, McDonald's believes it's found a better way to execute its hallmark Olympic kids program: Make them stars in the opening ceremony and build a global activation around their adventures.

The high-profile asset required an extraordinary concession to a sponsor by the International Olympic Committee, leery of overt branding at the Games, and for local planners who use the ceremony as a national showcase.

"Working with the IOC and the Rio organizing committee, we found something we think is lightning in a bottle," said John Lewicki, McDonald's head of global alliances. "It's one of the highlights of the Games. The great pride and joy of each organizing committee is the showcase they do in the opening ceremony, and we have an opportunity to give 100 kids a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to participate in that. We're really excited."

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The Olympics' exclusive worldwide restaurant sponsor has been sending children to the Games since 2008, but each time the result was missing something, Lewicki said. The program was either not distinctive enough for a top-level sponsor, or too far removed from the original purpose of involving children directly in the events, a la its FIFA World Cup program that brings kids onto the pitch with players in pregame.

This year in Rio, children from 18 markets will participate in the Aug. 5 opening ceremony in front of a TV audience of billions. Their exact roles are a secret along with the rest of the show, but the night in Maracanã Stadium will mark the climax of an all-expense-paid week in Rio for them and their guardians.

It also will be the driving force of McDonald's entire 2016 Olympic campaign, Lewicki said. McDonald's content

marketing team will be documenting the children's journey at length for social media (the kids will not be identified as McDonald's participants in the ceremony). A massive NBC media buy will underscore McDonald's Olympic sponsorship.

Each market chose how to pick its representative youth participants. McDonald's USA passed on a chance to leverage the trips into an extended promotional campaign, only publicly informing children in the last two weeks with little external buildup. That sharply differs with Australia and the U.K., where the restaurants engineered a sweepstakes with major media partners starting in the spring.

The eight American winners are pairs of children who became friends while staying at a Ronald McDonald House, which serves families dealing with serious pediatric illnesses.

McDonald's marketing execs and the IOC had struggled with how to maximize the kids program for years. Bringing them directly onto the field like in the World Cup is hard because the IOC adheres to a strict clean-venue policy and local organizers worry about security.



McDonald's kids got to shoot arrows at the archery venue in London.

Photo by: GETTY IMAGES

In London, 200 kids had access to competition fields hours before events started. And in Sochi, 300 Russian children were invited to play hockey on Olympic rinks during the Games. But those didn't quite stack up.

For Rio, McDonald's considered everything, including having the kids serve as flower girls and boys or escorts for dignitaries at medal ceremonies. "But the challenge with that is that it's a lot," Lewicki said. "That's dozens and dozens of different ceremonies and logistics, moving kids around. That became a challenge."

The IOC suggested the opening ceremony, and Rio organizers agreed. An IOC spokesman said the discussion was part of an ongoing process to evolve sponsorship activation with all partners.

"While it's not written in any agreements per se, they understand the need to be a little bit more flexible to build in these opportunities, and do a little bit more for sponsors to make sure we have these opportunities," Lewicki said. "Because it is a showcase, and yes, the athletes are the most important part of it, but you also want your customers and clients to feel a part of it as well. They've been very good about listening and adapting."

Athlete ambassadors will also participate, along with their children. Americans Bart Conner, Nadia Comaneci, Dara Torres and Julie Foudy are on board for McDonald's.

Veteran Olympic sponsorship salesman Rob Prazmark thinks McDonald's access to the ceremony is unprecedented, saying the only comparable situation was in Atlanta in 1996, when Chevy trucks were part of the opening ceremony. "To me, that crossed the line," Prazmark said. "But to have the children be part of the McDonald's family, to be integrated — it's my impression with no branding — I think that's a very nice, proper way of acknowledging a different look at the rules to benefit a long-term corporate partner."

Notably, McDonald's won't depict athletes on its food packaging in the U.S., Lewicki said, instead opting for Olympic-themed graphics focusing on the kids program.

A TOP sponsor since 1996, McDonald's signed an eight-year extension in 2012 worth \$90 million to \$100 million per quadrennium.

In Rio, McDonald's has built fewer stores in Olympic zones than it did in London or Sochi, and won't have one serving journalists' headquarters. It will operate just one full-service restaurant in the international zone of the Athletes Village and a dessert kiosk in the Olympic Park, largely because the Rio Games are far more spread out.

Thirty-three American employees won an internal contest to help staff the stores, along with crew from upcoming Olympic hosts Korea, Japan and China.

McDonald's used Omnicom Group-owned agencies DDB and TBWA, along with Publicis-owned Leo Burnett.

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