

Manchester to claw back honour

In a follow up to September's study, SI's **David Fowler** discusses the latest in-depth research on the 2002 Commonwealth Games.

Failure to secure the 2006 soccer World Cup, indecision surrounding the future of Wembley Stadium and the recent abandonment of plans to build a stadium at Pickett's Lock for the World Athletics Championships 2005, have all dented Britain's credibility as a venue for major international sports events. The focus for many now is next year's Commonwealth Games in Manchester, in the hope that this will add credence to the nation's attempts to stage future events. Much of the reputation built on the back of successfully staging Euro '96 has subsided and is now in need of reaffirmation.

As the media reports on the problems besieging UK attempts to stage major events, preparations for next year's Commonwealth Games progress at an assured pace. Eight official sponsors and seven official partners have, at this stage, committed themselves to supporting the event. One of those official sponsors, The Guardian Media Group (GMG), commissioned Sponsorship Intelligence (SI) to conduct a research programme surrounding its sponsorship of the Games. The benchmark UK consumer study conducted one year prior to the event's staging uncovered some positive results.

The Commonwealth Games registered a 95% awareness level among adults in the UK, a level comparable to the 99% awareness recorded in this study for the Olympic Games. No other major multi-sport event came close to these two events in those terms: for example, only one in four respondents had heard of the Goodwill Games. The awareness figures for the Commonwealth Games also eclipsed those for the bi-annual World Championships in Athletics (from another recent SI study), which is widely regarded as the premium athletics meet after the Olympics.

It is encouraging that prior to any co-ordinated national advertising, almost 1 in 4 adults in the UK (who were aware of the tournament) knew that the next Games are due to take place in Manchester: more than 1 in 3 knew when. In the Greater Manchester area where Games issues are prevalent in the local press and television, and numerous outdoor advertisements carry the Games' branding, awareness of the forthcoming event was predictably high. Three quarters of respondents in this area were aware that the Games are due to take place in Manchester and over 70% noted that the event will be staged in 2002. These impressive local awareness figures demonstrate what levels could be achieved nationwide.

A section of the questionnaire deployed in this study was designed to quantify perceptions,

expressed at an earlier qualitative phase of research, pertaining to the standing of the Games. 62% of the consumer sample in the UK agreed with the statement, "I feel proud that the Commonwealth Games are taking place in this country". Also, the perceived significance of the event was conveyed by respondents through their willingness in both the quantitative and qualitative phases of research to spontaneously mention top event sponsors such as Mars, Nike, McDonald's, Coca-Cola and adidas as potential supporters of the event.

"But The Commonwealth Games 2002 are more than a sporting competition, they are widely known as the 'friendly games' bringing cultures and countries together. For us they are more than simply an opportunity to raise the profile of the Guardian Media Group. They're about how the city of Manchester is perceived in the future, the halo effect on the Greater Manchester economy and, with the Legacy Programme, the boost to regeneration in the region."

Guardian Media Group

The Sponsorship Intelligence research reported thus far suggests that the Commonwealth Games 2002 is starting well up the grid in terms of awareness and does not seem to be suffering from any crisis of credibility. However, this will not count for much if the public does not intend to tune in.

Intended TV viewership results were positive. Only 16% of adults in the UK noted that they would not watch any of the 2002 Commonwealth Games on TV. Perhaps of greater significance was the finding that a third of the sample intended to watch with a dedicated viewership. It is worth noting that a greater proportion of respondents in Sponsorship Intelligence's pre-Euro '96 study intimated that they were unlikely to watch that event at all.

An issue that the Games organisers may wish to address is the low awareness of the planned 'Spirit of Friendship Festival'. This will coincide with Jamaica's Independence Day and the Queen's Golden Jubilee, and is billed as a 'multi-cultural celebration'. However, at the time of this study, only 5% of those questioned in the UK claimed to be aware of plans to stage this event. Despite concerns being raised during qualitative discussion that such a festival should be

sensitively handled, it would seem that the public are receptive to the idea of the Games acting as more than a vehicle for competition. Testament to this was the particularly strong agreement recorded for the statement, "the Commonwealth Games are about bringing people and cultures together".

Although welcomed by everyone, the initiative by Games' organisers to price tickets affordably for all seems to have failed to entirely eclipse the inevitable public perception that such events are inherently overpriced. Illustrating this point, 1 in 4 adults responding to this study claimed to be unlikely to attend the Commonwealth Games because 'tickets are too expensive'. This is a perception that the national TV advertising campaign designed to coincide with the official ticket application launch will hopefully challenge.

What of sponsors? As mentioned, the study, which forms the basis of this article, was commissioned by one of the official sponsors of the event, the Guardian Media Group. It is clear that respondents in the UK as a whole recognised the vital role adopted by the GMG and such sponsors in terms of contributing to the Manchester area and the Games' fundamental staging and success.

However, a note of caution was served to sponsors by respondents in riposte to a statement commonly utilised by Sponsorship Intelligence - "they (The Guardian Media group) are sponsoring the event for purely commercial reasons". More of the sample agreed with this statement than did otherwise: however, promisingly this level of agreement was not as emphatic as had been the case in past studies. It is clear from more recent SI research that there is an increasing expectation among the public that sponsors should leverage their association with an event and therefore accrue 'commercial benefit'. Qualitative studies are revealing an impressive knowledge and awareness among the general public of potential marketing tools that sponsors should utilise.

One of the central themes adopted in this article, having been evident in the study conducted by SI, is that the potential for these Games is impressive. Already, awareness is at a respectable level and attitudes to the Games and sponsors alike are positive. If we see this awareness and interest rise exponentially, as one would expect as the event nears, Britain could have the perfect tonic for recent 'event hosting' headaches. ■

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