

September 25, 2009

Dear Victor,

Looking at the sport system through a strategic communications lens, my colleague, Jackie De Souza, and I have been thinking about the "better way" questions.

(Jackie is the former Director of Communications for the Canadian Olympic Committee. My client list includes a number of NSO's and MSO's including Commonwealth Games Canada. Jackie and I have collaborated on a number of projects over the years including the Bid for the Vancouver 2010 Winter Games).

How can we be better from a communications and marketing perspective? And what does that "better way" look like?

Here are a few initial thoughts and observations that stem from our collective experience working in the amateur sport sector. This is far from what we'd call "a plan" or "a solution" but, we hope, will serve as a kickstart to further discussions about how to bring stronger, more consistent support to the amateur sport system through better communications and marketing activities.

We started with this premise: if the goal is a world-leading sport system, what does the complementary communications and marketing function look like? In what ways does it support the development of world-class athletes and ever-increasing numbers of both sport participants and international podium performances? How does it operate? How is it different than today?

If we were to build the foundation for such a world-leading communications function, some of the basic building blocks would include:

- **Greater consistency and coordination**

Communications support to Canada's amateur sport community is fractured, inconsistent and largely ineffective. Larger organizations tend to be fairly well-resourced, while smaller ones flounder to produce even the bare minimum without access to the right expertise.

A **shared services approach** would bring the basics (e.g. writing, web development and maintenance, media relations, research, graphic design, translation, media clippings, etc.) to a larger number of sport organizations at a cost that leverages economies of scale.



Further, a more coordinated approach would produce real strategic value across the sector. Rather than competing with each other for “air time” in an increasingly crowded media space, adopting a more centralized approach to communication would allow NSO’s, for example, to leverage each other’s activities, complement storylines, reinforce sector-wide messaging, and realize the benefits of a more sophisticated approach (i.e. shared access to public opinion research, new media technology, etc.).

For athletes and coaches, a centralized approach could mean access to competent media relations training, photographic services, resume writing, as well as coaching in public speaking.

There are tangible upsides for other stakeholders as well. A centralized communications agency – with a complete, updated database of athlete and coach biographies, results, images, etc. – would be received enthusiastically by Canadian media, who constantly complain about inconsistent access to this kind of basic information. A bank of timely, newsworthy story ideas would also be well-received by the media and would help to generate more positive coverage.

Beyond communications, the same kind of sector-specific counsel could be offered in other critical areas such as fundraising and sponsorship, where most amateur sport organizations lack the knowledge and capacity to mount effective campaigns and where many are pitching the same foundations and corporate sponsors. A more coordinated approach could realistically generate greater revenues for the sector while delivering better results for sponsors and funders.

- **Less duplication**

Along the same lines, a more coordinated approach to marketing and communications would reduce the amount of unnecessary duplication. Across the sector we tend to “reinvent the wheel” on a regular basis. For example, as Canadian teams prepare for successive multi-sport Games – from Canada Games through Pan Ams, Jeux de la Francophonie, FISU, Commonwealth Games, right through to the Olympics and Paralympics – the communications function often starts from scratch, building perhaps on previous events, but failing to benefit from the knowledge and experience gained from other Games. Quite often, we’re talking about the same athletes – shouldn’t their experience be consistent from Games to Games?

Medical missions for major Games are coordinated through a central entity – why not consider the same kind of approach for communications and marketing?

- **Government funding**

In our view, as the federal government considers how best to contribute to the sport and physical activity communities, it’s our view that this is a logical place to demonstrate leadership by **funding such an essential sector-wide service.**



Clearly, there are obvious links to be made between promoting Canada's sport successes and supporting public policy objectives (i.e. healthy living, disease prevention, etc.). As we all know, consistent federal funding would allow for the development of an effective, long-term communications and marketing function, while mitigating the challenges that come with unpredictable, time-limited corporate support.

- **Committed to best practices**

In the same way we reach out to sport scientists, coaches, nutritionists, and sport psychologists – seeking the best practices around the world – we should be committed to same level of performance and expertise in marketing and communications.

A better way would see leading Canadian communicators **reaching out to experts** in other leading organizations worldwide, such as the USOC which has been highly cooperative and helpful in the past.

- **Dedicated, multi-platform promotion**

A chronic problem facing Canadian sport is the cyclical evaporation of public interest. How many times have we heard athletes and coaches complain about the fact that people only seem to pay attention for a couple of weeks every couple of years (i.e. during Summer and Winter Olympic Games)?

Shifting this paradigm will take a **sizeable, sustained effort** to promote Canadian athletes and coaches throughout the year and in a wide variety of sports. We would envision this as another potential service from a new central communications agency – leveraging the full range of platforms and technologies – to tell compelling Canadian stories. This isn't necessarily the all-sport cable channel being proposed by a couple of different organizations; rather, it could be exclusively an online presence with the full range of written and audio/visual content, including streaming video.

With proper funding and a commitment from the sector, there are tremendous opportunities for leadership, creativity and innovation.

- **Greater strategic capacity**

Manifested in many ways, a more strategic approach to communication across the sector would mean an **effective issue management function** so that sport organizations are in a better position to proactively influence problem issues and manage/mitigate them before they morph into crises.

Similarly, **effective crisis communications counsel** would be available to assist organizations facing intense media and stakeholder pressures. Rather than struggling in “damage control” mode, a better system would see a rapid, competent response and, ultimately, minimal damage to the organization's brand.



We hope these initial thoughts are helpful to the Panel as it prepares its report for Minister Lunn. Of course, we would be delighted to expand on any or all of these concepts should it be helpful to the Panel.

Regards,

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cc: Jackie De Souza