

Understanding strategic alignment for destination marketing and the 2004 Athens Olympic Games: Implications from extracted tacit knowledge

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Abstract

Major international hallmark events, especially the Olympic Games, represent a significant opportunity for marketing tourism to the host country. Due to the scale and importance of the event, the coordination between the Olympic organizing committee and the destination marketing organization of the host country becomes a knowledge-intensive and exceptionally complicated task. Analyzing on-site interview data collected from top executives of the two major organizations involved in the 2004 Summer Olympic Games (ATHOC and GNTO), this research achieved two objectives: (1) extracted and organized the tacit knowledge from both organizations to discover major issues concerning the Athens 2004 Olympic Games, and (2) identified the strategic alignment issues between the domains of Olympics planning and destination marketing and proposed a conceptual framework for the future Olympic host countries.

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1. Introduction

Large, internationally known events of world importance and high profile are considered as mega-events that have a major impact on the image of the host countries and cities (Bramwell, 1997a, b; Law, 1993). As a unique class of special events, these mega-events can be viewed further as large-scale tourism products and integral to tourism development and marketing plans (Getz, 1989). Mega-events not only directly attract participants and spectators to the host destinations but also raise the host country's profile through advertising and news coverage, indirectly generating tourism revenues from increased future visita-

tions (Bramwell, 1997a, b; Chalip, Green, & Hill, 2003; Morse, 2001; Mules & Faulkner, 1996). They are viewed as complex projects requiring multiple activities, resources, and time (Henderson, 2005). Within the group of mega-events, the Olympic Games especially receive tremendous attention internationally and represent a significant tourist asset for marketing tourism of the host area (Ahn & Ahmed, 1994; Bramwell, 1997a, b). The Olympic Games are unparalleled in their scale and the potential impact they can have on the economies of host cities, regions, and countries. The Games can provide an excellent opportunity for local businesses to leverage from networking, enhancing the economic benefits of sport events for host countries (Beriatos & Gospodini, 2004; Chalip & Leyns, 2002; O'Brien, 2006). The exposure and enormous interest of the Olympic Games can also provide an excellent opportunity for countries to market themselves to potential tourists. Therefore, mega-events such as Olympic Games

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offer the tourism industry of the host countries a unique opportunity to capitalize on their long-term market potential.

Before 1984, in which the Los Angeles Olympic Games made a surplus of approximately \$311 million, staging the Olympic events was considered a financial and administrative burden to the hosting country and city (Gratton, Dobson, & Shibli, 2000). Encouraged by the financial success of the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games and driven by the national pride of staging such a prestigious sport event, most recent host countries (especially Australia's 2000 Sydney Games and the United States' 1996 Atlanta Games) have realized that hosting Olympic Games can be not only a financial success but also an excellent opportunity to position or re-position both the host city and the host destination to a global audience. Olympic Games also help in fostering feelings of national pride and national identity among the host people in the host country (Karkatsoulis, Michalopoulos, & Moustakatou, 2005). The Games ignite feelings of patriotism, community spirit, and the desire to come together in the host communities (Waitt, 2003). In fact, some scholars have suggested that major sport events have become both an important contributor to the local economy (Gratton et al., 2000; Ritchie, 2000) and a vital component of the marketing mix for tourist destinations (Getz, 1998; Gibson, 1998). From the tourism perspective, most countries market their destinations through their destination marketing organizations (DMOs) that strive to differentiate their destinations from others (Buhalis, 2000). These organizations focus on promoting and marketing what the destinations have to offer to tourists and play an important role as a facilitator to achieve the strategic objectives of the destinations (Buhalis & Collins, 2003). The Olympic Games offer unique marketing opportunities and challenges to DMOs of host countries. This paper investigates these opportunities and challenges, especially the aspects that require coordination between the host country's DMO and the National Olympic Committee (NOC) for achieving strategic benefits from the Games.

1.1. Primary organizations

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) is the supreme authority of the Olympic Movement. Its primary responsibility is to supervise the organization and smooth operations of the Olympic Games in the host country. The organization of the Olympic Games is entrusted by the IOC to the NOC of the host country. Organized by the NOC, a committee is then formed exclusively for the Olympic Games, which communicates directly with the IOC. The Athens 2004 Olympic Games were planned and coordinated by the Athens Organizing Committee (ATHOC), an *ad hoc* strategic organization responsible for the Games. By contrast, the responsibility for marketing Greece as a tourism destination lay with its DMO, the Greek National Tourism Organization (GNTO). The

GNTO was a quasi-governmental, permanent agency before the Ministry of Tourism was reestablished in 2004. GNTO's efforts needed to be aligned carefully with the mega-event planning of ATHOC to maximize the benefits of the Olympic Games. Both entities can be characterized as knowledge-based organizations, because they share a common intellectual nature of handling complicated work with a well-educated, qualified, and knowledgeable workforce (Alvesson, 2001).

2. Research objectives

The Olympic organizing committee (e.g., ATHOC) is temporary in nature and is dissolved once the mega-event is over. On the other hand, the DMO for the country (e.g., GNTO for Greece) is a permanent entity. Its major functions remain the same before, during, and after the Olympic event, although the event offers extraordinary opportunities to expose the destination's image and features. For the tourism industry, it is extremely important to understand the alignment and coordination between these two organizations. The outcome from this learning process can be shared and can be of benefit to the tourism industry of other countries that plan to host international mega-events in the future. Although tourism scholars (Ritchie, 2000; Ritchie & Smith, 1991; Spilling, 1998) have documented the substantial destination marketing challenges faced by host countries of the Olympic Games, research based on the first-hand coordinating experience at such a scale is greatly needed. Since hosting Olympic events is a rare opportunity, most attention has been drawn to short-term industrial/economic benefits rather than long-term tourism contributions. Much of the unique experience, a form of tacit knowledge, gained by the organizing committees and DMOs of the host countries appears to have been lost, leaving future organizations of subsequent Olympic Games with limited knowledge of the unique aspects of the event. Therefore, the objectives of this study were (1) to extract and learn the implicit knowledge from both organizations' intellectual human capital regarding the 2004 Summer Olympic Games, and (2) to understand the alignment issues between the two organizations and propose a conceptual framework for suggesting strategic implications to future Olympic host countries. The second objective of this study occurred to the authors due to the results of the first objective. While analyzing the data collected from interviewing the elite officials from ATHOC and GNTO, various aspects that required coordination between the two organizations were recognized, if the country were to gain strategic benefits from hosting the Games. Thus, based on the analysis of the data collected in this study, the authors developed a conceptual framework whereby this coordination could be discussed further. The conceptual framework is not tested in this paper, because it was proposed based on the data collected and analyzed. This is typical of "grounded theory" research (Borgatti, 2007), wherein most

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