

The Olympics Unpeeled

In the annals of modern consumer culture, there are good products, there are great products, and there is the banana. The *Musa acuminata*, or Cavendish banana, elegantly encompasses almost everything that people want from food: Great taste, plenty of nutrients, and a colorful, biodegradable package that protects the goods yet peels off like the wrapping on a candy bar.

But when the United Fruit Company first began importing them at the beginning of the twentieth century, many people had no idea how to eat the strange new fruit. It was Edward Bernays, renowned propagandist and nephew of Sigmund Freud, who helped United Fruit launch a series of massive marketing campaigns that educated the masses. Through these campaigns, United Fruit essentially *created* the banana in the American psyche.

The Olympics are the banana of the broadcasting world – a nearly perfect product that ticks all the boxes of modern entertainment (drama, struggle,

glory, anguish, redemption, and a lot of fit, athletic bodies). But it's all buried deep inside a manic 16 days in which 302 separate events run in multiple venues for a combined 7,000 heats. Television alone, with its linear programming schedule and necessarily limited primetime coverage, can present only a fraction of the personal stories and unlikely triumphs that transform the Games into more than a collection of sports we only watch once every four years.

In other words, it may be 2012 but the majority of people are still consuming the Olympics with the peel on. So it's not surprising that some aren't enjoying the experience: During the Vancouver Winter Olympics in 2010, for instance, Nielsen reported ratings among American teenagers at 57 percent lower than the national average. The challenge is not to sell the games, but to find a better way to *create* them in the minds of viewers; to add context, reference points, and backstories that allow people to get past the tough outer skin and immerse themselves in the content underneath. ➡

This summer's Olympics might not be the first digital Games, but they will be available to more people on more screens than ever before. The teams behind one of the most ambitious multimedia events ever explain how the magic will happen.

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For this, the multimedia organizations behind London 2012 turned to some of the brightest minds in the world of digital media and asked them to do a job that even many in the advertising game don't quite understand: Win hearts and minds via digital channels. "It was quite an interesting environment to come into," says Alex Balfour, Head of New Media in the London 2012 Organizing Committee (LOCOG). "A lot of our senior management weren't people with publishing or digital backgrounds so I was asked some quite testing questions about what it is that I do. When I told them, it was: 'Well, what does that result in? What does that mean?'"

The Olympics are the largest logistical exercise in Britain since World War II—a fact repeated like a mantra around LOCOG headquarters in Canary Wharf, East London. The comparison is especially apt for Balfour because he and his handpicked team of 12 have taken a decidedly 'Shock and Awe' approach to their digital campaign. Over the course of five years they have either created or developed 77 different websites, apps, and channels addressing every level of consumer engagement with the Games.

The focal point is the main website, london2012.com, which acts as a sort of nerve center for ➡

anything you might want to know about the Olympics; from where to buy tickets to the location of kayak events to the rules of fencing. When the Games start, the Press Association will mainline articles into it, along with roughly 5,000 images a day from Getty. The other 76 sites include volunteer sign-up pages, physical education initiatives, cultural programs, spectator maps, apps that will give up-to-the-minute scores or news feeds for all the events, and even regularly updated Facebook and Twitter accounts for Wenlok, one of the Games' mascots.

Does that mean 2012 will see the first truly digital Games? Balfour smiles wryly. "They say that about every Games," he replies. "Ever since Atlanta had a website in '96. TV is still the biggest player in all this so it's not a digital Games *predominantly*, but I definitely think it's the first social media Games."

Balfour is concentrating a lot of his firepower on the most popular social media networks in the hope of adding an extra dimension to the connection between viewer and spectacle. But he's savvy to the corporate banalities that often accompany the term 'social network.' "It can't just be clever or smart-arsed, as in, 'Aren't we great for being on Twitter?' We actually want to push these technologies to be meaningful and useful in order to humanize them as far as possible."

That means multiple Twitter feeds for all the sports, alongside 'Easter egg' initiatives like the Olympic Pulse, an app through which people can send comments and photos to be shown online and on screens in athletics venues. Balfour is particularly excited about a program he calls 'Support Your Team,' in which Twitter is made into a competition ground for opposing supporters – with an eventual crowning of an overall 'Twitter Champion of the Games.'

At the time of writing, Balfour and his crew also have initiatives pending with Google, Facebook, Foursquare, and YouTube, among others, but juggling multiple websites and social media platforms over a range of devices wasn't the original plan. Back in the summer of 2005, when London won the Olympic bid, broadband connections only just outnumbered dial-ups in the UK; MySpace and Bebo were the largest social networks; 3G was a novelty and many in the media world still believed that 'convergence' was going to mean a little black box that would meet all television, video, and web-browsing needs. ➡



Around that time, Balfour and his team drew up an ambitious plan to build a platform that would aggregate and lend order to the digital content surrounding the Games coming from stakeholders, sponsors, and LOCOG itself. The proposed Olympic content hub would incorporate elements of Facebook, Foursquare, and AOL's Lifestream, to name a few. It may very well have worked, but then the landscape changed.

First, consumers' social behavior on the web didn't aggregate – it diffused. Instead of centering their activity in one place, web users went to Google to browse, Amazon to buy, Facebook to socialize, Pandora and Spotify for music, and Twitter for news. More recently, web users have adopted mobile devices. In March, Nielsen reported that American smartphone penetration had reached 49 percent – an increase of 38 percent in only a year. This jump, in the US and other developed countries, has added another vigorous organism to a primordial soup that was already seething.

"In the last six to nine months, social networking and mobile technology have essentially merged and made mobiles into an important part of modern marketing," says Simon Andrews, the founder and

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CEO of Addictive, a mobile advertising and content consultancy firm based in London. "It represents a profound shift in how people interact with brands."

Andrews lists two main ways that people currently use mobile internet devices: "First, they share things, but the more pertinent one is that they use their devices for fact-finding; as a way of contextualizing what they are witnessing. Whenever content is being viewed there are people picking up their phone or tablet and looking for social elements via Twitter, Google, or Wikipedia, so we are seeing a lot of chatter via mobile devices during certain events. For instance, last year, during the Super Bowl, an ad spot for Chrysler featuring Clint Eastwood made their Google searches spike by about 120 percent."

Andrews predicts that this so-called 'second-screen' viewing will be more popular than ever at London 2012, both in homes and in the grandstands. His assertion is backed up by a man who has made it his job to figure out exactly how the internet and television interact. Alan Wurtzel, NBC's President of Research and Media Development, interprets data that Google and NBC glean from large entertainment spectacles, like *American Idol*, ➡

or in this case the Olympics, to try and make sense of the ways people consume them. By comparing the Beijing Olympics in 2008 to the Vancouver Winter Olympics in 2010 he found that online viewership doubled between the two Games.

“In my view, TV is still king,” Wurtzel says, “but that doesn’t mean it won’t be supplemented. Simultaneous experience, that is watching something and interacting with that content on various platforms is only going to increase.”

“In terms of in-depth coverage, we will deliver a page for every athlete, for every country, for every sport, and for every event. If you add those together, that’s in the tens of thousands of pages of coverage,” he says. “The idea is that whenever you go to one of those pages, whether it’s a British diving star or a German rower or whatever, that page will have the most up-to-date video, text, story of their Games, any news stories about them, all of it delivered in real time, automatically. By the time a race finishes and

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That’s great news for media organizations, which are now able to interact with their customers over more content than ever before. But it’s also a huge challenge, requiring awesome amounts of content. That’s where Phil Fearnley comes in. Fearnley is the General Manager of News & Knowledge at the BBC – it’s his job to oversee a large chunk of the corporation’s Olympics content production.

In Beijing, that meant eight streams and roughly 1,200 hours of standard-definition content. Now it means 24 streams and 2,500 hours of high-definition content. In other words, every minute of every sport, plus opening and closing ceremonies, recaps and commentary. As Fearnley says with a smile, “There is a level of scale to this that can freak you out. It’s our job to make some sense of it.”

The BBC will make live coverage and ‘on demand’ recaps of every event available on mobile, tablet, computer, and television through a raft of satellite providers (what the BBC calls their ‘Four Screen Strategy’), but they aren’t stopping there. Video coverage of the actual sports is just one branch of what Fearnley describes as an Olympics ‘content nucleus.’ Not a social hub like the scrapped LOCOG platform, but a colossal database of news, video, and information that will be the portal through which remote viewers will consume the games when and how they choose.

someone has won, you can click on their page and it will have a video of them crossing the finishing line.”

Consider, for a moment, the possibilities. With the right cable channels and a cell phone, a viewer could spend 16 days watching events that never even get a whiff of primetime television coverage, basically constructing their own personal viewing experience from a mélange of live, recapped, and in-depth coverage. Most won’t. Most will stick to watching on TV with the odd internet ‘supplement’ to use Wurtzel’s term, but the groundwork has been laid for a completely new, user-generated way to comprehend this type of spectacle as a multimedia experience.

Because for Fearnley, this isn’t just about the Olympics. “We want to build a data platform that doesn’t just power the Games but also leaves a legacy that allows us to deliver real-time, automated data irrespective of what the nature of the event is. Sports events? Yes. But equally for news and other things.”

He’s thinking big, and goes so far as to compare the combined television and digital broadcasts to the 1953 coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, which saw the emergence of television as a mass medium in Britain. “It’s not just about the video,” he says. “It’s about having an experience that brings together video and data in ways that have never been possible before.” 📺