

The main event

Delivering an Olympic customer experience to remember

Most of the early planning for the 2012 Games has centred on regenerating east London and capturing long-term benefits for the UK as a whole. But neither of these objectives will be achievable if the Games fail to deliver a world-class customer experience.

Chad Lion-Cachet, Chief Executive of Sportsworld, the international sports travel and event

management business, which has delivered travel experiences for clients at 12 Olympic Games, not to mention 11 World Cups (football, rugby and cricket) and six Commonwealth Games. Here, he outlines the keys to an excellent experience for all Olympic customers – from spectators through to stakeholders.



Images courtesy of sportsworld



Since their re-birth in Athens in 1896, the Olympic Games have acted as a catalyst for achieving a number of complementary objectives, such as improving the infrastructure of a city; delivering state-of-the-art sporting facilities; showcasing the host nation to the world for future economic benefit; inspiring sporting achievement; and encouraging grass-roots participation.

In 2012, the privilege of hosting the Games of the XXX Olympiad will fall to London, making it the only city thus far to host the Summer Games for a third time (the first two occasions being 1908 and 1948). Britain, for so long a major player in sport on the world stage, has the opportunity to share its passion for sport once more, and London, long established as a major economic hub, can present itself as a modern, vibrant and multicultural city.

In order for these objectives to be fully realised, it is critical that the customer experience during the Olympic and Paralympic Games is as positive as it can possibly be.

To borrow a phrase from the Hollywood movie 'Field of Dreams', putting on an Olympic Games is not as simple as saying 'if you build it, they will come'. Of course, the athletes will come (over 10,000 of them), as will the media (some 20,000), international dignitaries, official sponsors, corporate guests and sports fans – young and old – from across the globe. But will they come back, again and again?

Will Londoners be proud of their Olympic legacy?

Will the youth of the world be inspired to choose sport?

For these questions to be met with a positive response from those attending the Games in London – and for that 'buzz' to filter down the airwaves to the billions watching on TV – the customer experience must be at the heart of planning now, ready for delivery in 2012. Of the controllable elements, Sportsworld believes there are five priorities in the Olympic context that must be managed so that the myriad stakeholders go home satisfied with their Olympic experience.



1. Destination marketing

London is already one of the world's most popular cities – some 26.6 million visits are expected in 2006. But the Olympic Games represent a marketing opportunity like no other. London can showcase afresh its diverse portfolio of cultural, historical and entertainment options, and promote the new range of commercial possibilities that will have been developed, from business conferences to office openings, especially in the 'reconstructed' eastern part of the city.

The growth of in-bound consumer and business tourism should not be restricted to the capital: the London Games may be the 'anchor', but additional excursions and destination marketing options exist throughout Britain. Organisations such as Visit London and VisitBritain, in their respective leading roles, have a singular, strategic opportunity to use the London Olympics to underpin their marketing efforts, from now through to 2012 and beyond. Within this timeframe, Beijing 2008 will be an important occasion to promote London and the UK alike to a vast international audience in the world's fastest growing super-power.

In terms of destination marketing, where Athens struggled – largely due to negative media attention – Sydney triumphed: over 90% of Sportsworld's customers (long and short haul) enhanced their Olympic experience with add-on excursions such as a tour of the Opera House, a walk up the Harbour Bridge or a trip to the Great Barrier Reef. Well-designed and intelligently marketed packages ('Best of British', perhaps) should get people excited about visiting London and Britain, and not just as a 'one-off'.

2. Transportation

Getting to London is not difficult. Major international airports, a train link with continental Europe (soon directly into Stratford) and cross-Channel ferry and hovercraft services mean that many modes of transport are available. Getting around the capital, however, especially during the Games, will present more challenges. If there is one aspect guaranteed to ruin a customer's experience of the Games (and, by association, the city), it is spending hours getting to an event or, worse, missing the action altogether.

Fortunately, the London bid plans have been rigorously assessed in terms of venue selection, transport options and transit times, with the expectation that London 2012 will be one of the most compact and commuter-friendly Games ever. In some Olympic host cities, Sportsworld has had to provide its customers with an independent transport system, so that they are able to move around freely without concerns over the accessibility and reliability of public transport. Thankfully, this is not anticipated in London.



3. Accommodation

London's status as a premier international tourism and business destination means that its 'bed stock' is considerable. With over 50,000 rooms at four-, five- and six-star hotels, and many more in the mid and lower range, it could be said that London offers a bed for every budget and for every type of traveller. For one month in 2012, however, the Olympic demand-supply dynamic will stretch London's hotel capacity more than ever.

Customer-centred hoteliers will recognise the need to be flexible during the Games, as guests leave early for their events, return late or make additional demands on their staff. Sportsworld's experience of operating programmes at 12 Olympic Games is that customers spend on average fewer than seven nights in a hotel in most Olympic cities. The majority also spend little over five hours in their hotel room as they make the most of every event, entertainment or hospitality opportunity. A light breakfast served early, even pre-packed for the journey ahead, or a late night meal to nourish guests weary from a day of excitement all play their part in adding to the customer experience.

4. Ticketing

It is an obvious statement, but without a valid ticket, there is no Olympic experience to be had. The ticket (or series of tickets) is the key component around which flights, accommodation, on-the-ground services and other extra-curricular activities can be packaged. The individual customer won't care that London 2012 will process nine million tickets across more than 350 day and night-time sessions and 27 sports. He or she cares only that the right tickets are handed over at the right time for the right events. It is as simple and, it turns out, as complex as that.

Sportsworld has been fortunate to secure official ticket agent appointments with many National Olympic Committees over the years. For us, this process comprises over a dozen iterative 'sub-processes', including initial negotiation of tickets from the Organising Committee for the Games (OCOG), verification of the full inventory (tickets confirmed, denied or awaiting decision, by category type), secure storage, transit and distribution. When it comes to tickets, there can be no corners cut and no mistakes made – the customer experience depends on it.

5. Managing expectations

The unmatched interest and excitement generated by an Olympic Games, and the range of stakeholders involved, mean that you can't please all of the people all of the time, as the old adage goes. London 2012 will appeal to people across the world. Besides the athletes and media, key stakeholders include IOC and OCOG officials and their invited guests; as yet unnamed sponsors and suppliers at different levels, plus their guests; officials of international sporting federations; and the mass of sports fans too.

Given the logistical challenges and operating conditions of the Olympic context, probably the most important aspect of any Olympic travel experience is managing expectations (with contingency planning coming a close second). Communicating with customers regularly, and making them aware of programme changes as they inevitably happen, is part of the process – and can in itself 'protect' their experience to a large extent.

Sport rouses the emotions like few other things in life. In 2012, sporting memories of unexpected victories and agonising defeats will be etched in their minds of competitors and spectators alike. Off the field of play, the Games must be memorable for all of London's Olympic customers, and for the right reasons. The principal challenges are to get them thinking about London early; to bring them to the city and move them around safely and efficiently; to accommodate them comfortably; to provide access to the events they want to be part of; and to manage their expectations in the process. In this way, the Olympic feel-good factor will endure beyond the 2012 Games and become forever associated with London and the whole UK.

Chad Lion-Cachet, Sportsworld

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