

## **Brand push for budding sportspersons**

### **Large brands need to motivate youngsters and stay with them in their bid to make a career of sports, writes Deepti Ganapathy First Person**

Five years ago, I was teaching a course on public relations in one of the country's premiere B-schools, when a discussion about brands creating narratives around events surfaced, the conversation veered towards the Olympics and the way brands were 'cashing in' on this once-in-a-four-year event in rather unique ways.

The debate sparked off in class when we discussed how a particular brand was booed for 'not being open about their views on doping', while other brands were mining gold at Rio. As India opened its treasure chest with wins, the discussion turned to how brands were using the trials and tribulations that these athletes endure to show their unstinted support. Yes, sportspersons struggle and go through tremendous hardship while they train. The media glare that comes with sports like cricket does not get trained on these athletes and sportspersons from other events. The four years of hard work that they endure between the Olympics is hardly publicised by the media or big brands. Only when they win accolades through their own sheer determination and hard work are they surrounded by the media and brands.

One of my students while making a presentation on a PR campaign got emotional during his talk. He was describing a campaign lauding a woman who fought all odds and made it to the Olympics. A few other examples are of a brand celebrating the hardships of a world record holder in the form of an animated video showing him from his growing-up years. Another brand shows the athletes remembering their mothers' encouraging words, gestures and presence before the start of their match/game to celebrate the hardworking and silently inspiring mothers who are really the backbone of these sportspersons.

When I worked as full-time journalist, I was often besieged with press releases from PR professionals and agencies that pushed for getting 'earned media' in the form of clever tactics and events. Rarely have I come across a PR professional who promoted a sportsperson other than a cricketer.

This year at the Tokyo Olympics, brands are concerned about the lack of eyeballs in the form of spectators at stadiums – where Covid restrictions will be in place. It is now that brands can show resolve or rather a spirit of true sportsmanship. It takes several years of discipline, dedication and constant practice for a sportsperson to continue to be in form and play a sport consistently. The pandemic has been cruel to them, taking away access to physical sporting infrastructure and other pursuits that have to run parallel to their coaching – such as regular workouts at the gym, cycling and running. Yet, they have kept themselves motivated by taking online coaching, converting garages into mini-playgrounds etc, and keeping themselves fit and fiery to win a medal at the Olympics.

Brands should look at 'catching them young' and be a part of the wins and losses of sportspersons in order to earn respect and credibility from their various stakeholders. When we see messages on social media saying 'go for gold' and 'we are proud of you' etc, they are indirectly celebrating what they would have loved to be or achieve - a sportsperson in a country where sports is still considered second to academics.

At the end of the day, a sportsperson does not require our money or accolades. All they want from us is respect. This is why brands should encourage and motivate our young ones to take up sports as a career.

(The author is a faculty member, Indian Institute of Management Bangalore)