

# The Olympian lesson for brands



## Beijing 2008. The lasting memory?

With apologies to Adlington, Ainslie, Hoy and the rest of the triumphant Team GB, there are two outstanding candidates that shone on the global stage.

Ask me midway through the fortnight and I'd have had to say Michael Phelps. A day later and it all changed in 9.69 seconds of dominant, fluid, pure sprinting genius. But it wasn't just the record, or the winning, or the fact that (let's face it) the 100m is the flagship event of the whole Games – it was the performance of Usain Bolt.

Phelps exercised a similar, perhaps even greater dominance in his events, and demonstrated a stamina that almost defied belief. But his was an engineered performance, ruthlessly efficient. There was a robotic consistency about his efforts that became almost predictable.

Bolt's was a more human performance. He put his whole personality on display, before, after, and even during his event. Jacques Rogge may have felt the easing up and the arm gestures were disrespectful and un-Olympian – I thought he was just fantastic. Showmanship, exuberance, passion – “Look at me World, I've arrived!”

His 200m was, in pure athletic terms, an even more impressive performance. Twelve years on from Michael Johnson's seminal World record (“It'll never be beaten in my lifetime”), the last athletic performance that truly made the jaw drop with an audible thud, Bolt fully committed to demonstrate what he could really do. Into a headwind. After seven races in six days. Wait until he's fresh...

As you can probably tell, I'm an athletics fan. Ovet, Thompson, Dave Bedford in his black socks, Tommie Smith (he did the arms-out thing

while running 19.83 for the 200m back in 1968, but just gets remembered for the black gloved salute) were the heroes of my youth. Swimming just never had the same appeal or cachet.

But I'm trying to be objective here. I'm looking at Bolt and Phelps from the perspective of a branding man. What can we learn from them that can be applied to the commercial world? Phelps went into the Games with his destiny already plotted out for him. A portfolio of established endorsements – Visa, AT&T, Speedo – and a lucrative financial bonus for achieving his stated pre-Games target of (the 'impossible') eight golds. Corporate America appears to have locked him in – his challenge was to not mess up, to cope with the pressure, and to deliver what was expected.

The Phelps 'brand' is all about superb execution. Honed, excellent performance. No real room for flamboyance, no desire for risk. Get the job done; albeit at the highest physical level. (Note from 2009 – getting caught allegedly smoking something herbal somewhat undermined this carefully controlled image.)

Usain Bolt is almost the polar opposite. Raw, individual, unpredictable – what will he do next? His is a different kind of brand, more earthy, with more rough edges, more charismatic. And therefore...somehow...more attractive?

We're a strange lot, aren't we? Our rational self wants certainty, wants our brands to deliver, time after time – not to let us down. One failure, and we consign them to the bin. But, for most of us, that's not quite enough, because we've also got an emotive side that craves satiation, and won't just accept predictability.

We hanker for a bit of excitement. We enjoy the edge-of-the-seat thrill. We are prepared to go to the edge of the precipice and to peer over. So we warm to characters that don't quite conform. That have a bit of an edge to them. That haven't been boxed up and packaged for mass consumption.

Creating a brand should involve the rational components – a systematic, rigorous approach that ensures all the right bases are covered and ticked off. Many brands do all of this very well, and some of them deliver the same kind of consistent, excellent performance that we saw from Michael Phelps.

But the brands that really stand out – the ones that we don't just buy, and use, and like; the ones we really feel an attachment to, and that we love – they have something extra. A bit of charisma, and personality. A bit of 'stand out'. A bit of Usain 'Lightening' 'Insane' Bolt.

It's hard to define, and even more difficult to prescribe. It's a creative process, rather than the result of a system. It's a bit of magic. When it happens, you'll know. You won't necessarily feel comfortable with it (initially, at least), but that really shouldn't matter. Great brands break new territory. They break away from convention and set themselves apart from the rest.

And we all love them.