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10 suggestions to boost the Olympics

By Bruce Horovitz and Laura Petrecca, USA TODAY

The Olympics have an Olympian problem: slip-sliding interest.



Consumer psychologist Carol Moog suggests replacing commentary with music during snowboard races.

By Jack Gruber, USA TODAY

That appears to be the message from TV viewership, which is falling faster than the ice dancers in Torino this week. Winter Games prime-time viewership through Wednesday was down 19% from the 1998 Nagano Games and down 33% from Salt Lake City in 2002. Sure, consumers are increasingly using alternative media to keep pace with the Games, but not that much.

The real issue: image.

To many Americans — particularly younger people — the Olympics aren't relevant. Put simply, they aren't cool. "I hear no buzz about the Olympics any more," says Irma Zandl, a trends forecaster. "The Olympics has lost its soul."

Fixing the Games' image won't be easy. Or cheap. Or without risk. But it can be done, say sports marketing gurus, image experts and event planners contacted by USA TODAY to brainstorm 10 ways to revive Olympic "cool."

Dick Ebersol, chairman of NBC Universal Sports, this week made the case that there's no crisis — that the Games' audience isn't declining any faster than for other big TV events: "Are the Olympics off a bit? Yeah. But they are not off one iota from all the other major sports events and certainly not from the major glamour events like the Oscars and Grammys."



U.S. bobsledders Jean Prahm, left, and Vonetta Flowers dine in the athletes' village in Sestriere, Italy.

By Tom Curley, AP

But if the decline is to be reversed, image matters.

Big bucks are at stake. NBC paid \$2.3 billion for the rights to the 2004, 2006 and 2008 Olympics. The 11 top Olympic sponsors — including Visa, Coca-Cola and McDonald's — pay about \$50 million each for sponsorship rights every four years. To continue to justify that kind of money, serious progress might be critical not just by the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver, but by the 2008 Beijing Games.

Here are 10 ways experts would fix what they see as the Games' most urgent image issues:

1. Put more 'reality' in Olympic TV.

In a world of risqué reality TV shows, people crave nitty-gritty details and down-and-dirty competition.

"They should have athlete confessional rooms" where Olympians privately vent their innermost thoughts to the camera, says David Adler, founder of BiZbash Media, which produces an events trade website and magazine.

Athletes could be fitted with minicams and microphones that they wear 24/7, so viewers can see and hear what's going on during the competitions, as well as at practices, parties and team meetings. The content could be streamed to hot Gen Y websites such as MySpace.com, Adler says.

Focusing attention on a handful of diverse athletes before and during the Games could offer "a few ongoing reality shows within the Olympic broadcast," says Robert Thompson, director of the Center for the Study of Popular Television at Syracuse University.

Yet another way to offer more reality TV would be to reinvent the Olympic Village. With its global appeal and throngs of young, hormonally charged athletes, the Olympic Village is ripe for an uber-cool transformation — and maybe a few gimmicks.

"Set up hidden cameras in the Olympic Village to catch any late-night fraternizing between Olympians," says Chris Allen, media director at ad agency GSD&M. Greg Lane, the agency's director of media production, suggests staging live televised concerts with marquee music groups at the village.

2. Let viewers have a say.

Viewer voting on televised competitions such as *American Idol* has given rise to new phenomena: official judges might get the last word, but they're no longer the only voice.

Text messaging and online voting have changed all that. Even if viewers don't decide who wins Olympic medals, many would welcome the chance to weigh in on Olympic events and personalities. "Young viewers need to feel like they're involved in their programming," says Catherine Mullen, general manager of TV music network Fuse.

Mullen suggests NBC or the International Olympic Committee create an online venue where teens could post messages on topics such as which athletes would make the best-looking Olympic couple.

Another way to give viewers more control over their Olympic experience would be to break up the TV monopoly. "What would happen if different networks or media could buy the right to cover events or groups of events?" asks Don Dorsey, president of Dorsey Productions, which has produced Disneyland's Main Street parade. "This would present enormous logistical and economic problems, but would allow the public to vote with ratings."

3. Tap more tech.

Rather than banking on the younger set watching TV, Olympic organizers need to move faster in distributing content through other media. Think more podcasting, streaming video, text messaging, even ring tones that have Olympians saying cool phrases, Mullen says.

She also suggests tying in with video game makers to create Olympic content that kids can play online or on their cellphones while the athletes are competing.

To interest more teens and tweens, NBC should stream all Olympic video live, including on cellphones, says Sreenath Sreenivasan, an online media professor at Columbia University.

While this might cut prime-time viewing, he says NBC could make up lost revenue with the right fee structure. It could sell an Olympic package for "a couple hundred dollars" or sell viewing rights for individual events, sports or athletes.

Many of these things have been talked about before, but the profit potential is finally proving out. Ebersol said this year is the first time the network will make a profit on NBCOlympics.com — albeit a small one, with the estimate at \$5 million to \$6 million.

4. Spotlight big rivalries.

Any sporting event without rivalry is boring — especially the Olympic Games, says Michael Lynch, senior vice president of marketing for Olympic sponsor Visa USA.

Think back to the 1980 "Miracle on Ice" when the U.S. hockey team beat the Russians. But who knew, he asks, that the Austrian ski team is the U.S. ski team's biggest rival in Torino this year?

"We could do a much better job building up the rivalries," he says.

5. Decide more medals head-to-head.

Gold, silver and bronze medals in timed events could be decided by a single race pitting the three finalists with the best times, says Lynch. "The less done by the clock the better."

Then, TV should pay attention to losers, because young audiences love to watch failure, says Alissa Quart, author of teen marketing book *Branded: The Buying and Selling of Teenagers*. "Teens feel a lot of resentment towards extremely talented people and like to know that they fail, too," she says.

"Forget winning. If someone wins, that's a bonus," says Steve Stoute, a marketing expert who connects celebrities with businesses. "They have to tell the back story the way they do on reality shows so you have a feel for the characters."

6. Offer more and hipper music, less and hipper talk

Olympic events need to move to the beat of diverse genres of current music, suggests Carol Moog, a consumer psychologist and blues harmonica player. "It should look more like a music video," she says.

For events such as snowboarding, she says, lose the TV commentary altogether in favor of a Gen Y-favored music mix.

When commentary is called for, NBC should find more young, hip voices, says Katie Paine of KDPaine & Partners, which consults on business reputations. No self-respecting teen wants someone like their father describing snowboarding, she says. "Instead of someone translating snowboard-ese into English, you need someone who actually speaks snowboard-ese."

7. Go back to the 4-year wait.

Sponsor pressure nudged organizers to reschedule the Olympic Games from every four years to separating the Winter Games and Summer Games two years apart beginning in 1994 with the Lillehammer Winter Games. "It's created Olympic fatigue," says management consultant Pam Murtaugh. "It was a pinnacle experience that has been diluted by its frequency."

8. Be less predictable.

"Unpredictability and surprises really can work to your advantage," says Don Mischer, producer of the Atlanta and Salt Lake City Olympics opening and closing ceremonies, as well as the 2006 Super Bowl half-time show. For the Atlanta Games, Mischer and a handful of people kept the last torch carrier a secret — and awed the crowd when Muhammad Ali came out.

9. Be more extreme.

Olympic organizers could rip a page from ESPN's extremely lucrative X Games — adding a slate of grittier, heart-pumping events. For the Winter Olympics, organizers should consider adding a snowboarding competition that includes a terrain park with jumps and sliding rails, says Ron Semiao, creator of ESPN's X Games. For the Summer Olympics, he suggests adding skateboarding, bicycle motocross and motorized sports.

10. Rethink the Olympic mission.

"Is it about athletic competition at the highest level, or is it about generating revenue?" asks David Carter of Sports Business Group, a consulting firm. Like other big-time sports, the Olympics has become "addicted to the corporate dollar," he says. As a result, more critical decisions are being made by the network and sponsors, not athletes or organizers.

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