

London 2012 has not only inspired a generation to emulate its sporting heroes, the success of its communication strategy provides a textbook case for communication and media specialists. **Anna Averkiou** talks to Jackie Brock-Doyle about how it worked

Crisis? What crisis?



AMID ALL THE USUAL WORK-related photos, notes, posters and memos, one hand-written sheet of paper stands out on Jackie Brock-Doyle's office wall. It lists the core themes from the London Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games (LOCOG) winning bid, and that, she says, has served as a reminder of what they said and how it has remained central to all that followed.

"For LOCOG it was all about making sure it would inspire a generation and 'inspire' was a word that was used throughout everything," she explains. "I am a massive believer in that if you set a clear vision you create a clear communication plan – and then you take everybody with you. Crisis communication follows the same theme. Normally, when things go dreadfully wrong, it's when you have too many people having their own agendas and creating their own vision going forward."

Brock-Doyle, who is Director of Communications and Public Affairs for LOCOG, was asked to put together a communication strategy for the London bid,

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having worked on the Sydney Olympics and Manchester Commonwealth Games. She was one of the first people to join the team in 2003 and for her this was key to ensuring that communication was involved at every stage and level of the project, including reporting directly to the Olympic Board.

"I always believe that communication departments should sit at the board table – always! And if they don't, it means that you will never have communication as a central pillar going forward."

Collaboration was essential and Brock-Doyle says she's rarely seen this done in the

communications arena as effectively as through the London process, which featured a group of communication directors from all the core public and private sector delivery partners, including the Government, London Mayor's Office, the British Olympic Association (BOA), the British Paralympic Association (BPA), nations and regions, the Police and Transport for London.

Brock-Doyle chaired the meetings: "For the last seven years, we met at least once every single month as a comms team and we had phone calls with the tier just below us every single week. As a result, we have an absolute fundamental understanding of each other. We've all seen every issue from someone else's perspective as well as our own and having strong relationships across comms meant that when things did go wrong, we were able to empathise, step in, support ... and we all did that. If someone was having a particularly bad time over one issue and in effect had taken a hit for the team, we would all roll in behind."

Each year the comms team would examine all it was doing, decide which message needed more work and make a concerted effort to ensure



the messages were clearly defined through the media. By the time the Games came along, themed press conferences were building on the messages already in the public consciousness.

Simplicity

Simplicity is a watchword for Brock-Doyle: "I'm not a fan of writing massive plans – you'll end up with a strategy that sits on a shelf like a policy and no one will ever read it. And then you're in trouble."

"It is about breaking it down into simple component parts and making sure everyone believes in it. We shifted things around a little bit, we would debate what should be a priority from different quarters – but ultimately we all agreed. The communication plan as it sat, with all the stakeholders across the board, consisted of ten slides about each of those areas, key milestones and key events we were going to do during the year."

The actual strategy fitted onto one page. "Brilliant basics" was a creative picture produced each year outlining what had to be done brilliantly to stage the Games. This would

Day three of the Olympic Games, which were widely seen as being efficient and successful

Getty Images for LOCOG

cover progress around the Olympic Park and other venues, what the LOCOG, BOA and BPA were doing to get the athletes ready, the legacy progress, and the delivery process around transport, security and city operations.

Brock-Doyle explains: "Every one of those had a very clear defined set of milestones and we talked about it being the 'drumbeat of progress'. We would tell everyone what we were doing, tell everyone we were doing it and tell everyone we'd done it year on, year on – it was really critical to keep that going."

"Around all this we needed to bring 'Everyone's Games' to life so we looked at about three or four core moments every year where we would put in a huge amount of effort into making them really big to get the media, the public, the stakeholders, staff – everybody behind them."

"That one slide meant that everyone had a clarity of message that they wouldn't have got if they'd had to read through a massive comms plan."

Taking everyone along on the journey was crucial: "If people believe in the vision, and believe in the comms strategy because it's linked to the vision – the chances are they are going to ultimately say the right thing if the stuff hits the fan."

"You can only truly see attitudinal shift in people's perceptions when you make it a mass thing, so the big moments were accompanied by staff events – not just within LOCOG, but also partners – and it really worked."

As for the media, Brock-Doyle stresses the importance of nurturing relationships and listening to what its members want from the start. "If you think of the media as an enemy, you're already in trouble," she warns.

"The media is part of the way you communicate and it has to be embedded in your plans – you can't do it any other way. It's not like a direct marketing campaign where you can talk directly to your customer. You have to go through the prism of the media's interpretation. It doesn't matter what you directly tell a customer or member of the public – if the media is saying something completely different, it has significantly more power than you do."

The last few slides of the comms strategy addressed the risks and issues and how they would be dealt with. For many, the euphoria

Jackie Brock-Doyle

Director of Communications and Public Affairs for the London Organising Committee of the Olympic Games and Paralympic Games



of winning the Games was short-lived, with the tragic 7/7 terrorist attacks in London the following day. But for Brock-Doyle, September 11, 2001, was the game-changer for major events around the world. "Clearly all the security plans for the UK changed on the back of 7/7 – but we were already part way down that path after 9/11. I don't think any of us at that point thought what it would be like for the Olympic Games. I think everybody thought about the people who were involved first – and then you think, 'actually we're going to fight for a better world'. It's a very British thing... we're not going to let this change and we are going to continue and we're going to make this better. But again – you have to plan for it."

Security was always going to be the biggest threat for London 2012, resulting in the biggest peace-time security operation the UK has ever seen. It is also a difficult area to talk about because by the very nature of security there are details that cannot be discussed. The same holds true from the communication perspective: "If you don't talk about security, people will worry about it. If you do talk about security people worry about it – which is the lesser of the two evils?"

Brock-Doyle and her counterparts at the Metropolitan Police and Home Office took the view that they: "Weren't going to run or hide and the more information you give people, the less fearful they are." This resulted in a proactive and open approach, briefing the media on how security was being managed, predicting what it would

be like and emphasising how they were working together to secure the country.

This approach was in stark contrast to other Games, so when the so-called 'Olympic Ring-of-Steel' attracted criticism and, in some instances, scaremongering press reports – particularly when missile systems were installed on some residential buildings



The communication strategy fitted onto one page

LOCOG

► – the team and its partners were prepared. A number of tests were held involving all partners, emergency services, the media and the Cabinet Office Briefing Room (COBR), the Government response team for national emergencies. They included desk-top exercises through to simulating three days where they would all work through 24 hours, to see how they would cope with situations from toxic plumes to a terrorist attack.

“People don’t expect you, as an organiser of a major event, to go into the event for the very first time and hope for the best. So again it’s about making sure they are a part of it and they have information on it – and the media is part of that.”

Drawing on her experience in Sydney and Manchester, Brock-Doyle introduced a Message Integration Group (MIG) to sit alongside Main Operations Centre. A 24-hour operation, it was manned by key senior comms people from all the stakeholders, run and chaired by the LOCOG comms team.

“During Games time, decisions were often made operationally on a minute-by-minute basis. The MIG didn’t talk to the press – its sole responsibility was to identify who actually had any stake in any of those issues, what messages they wanted to leave, co-ordinate that message and agree who was going to issue it and when – and sometimes there were different lines. That’s fine. We don’t actually all need to say the same thing but we need to make sure we don’t say different things. We’d

came two weeks before the Games, when the military was asked to provide up to 3,500 extra troops to guard the Olympics because the private security firm, G4S, was unable to deliver the number of staff it had promised. However, Brock-Doyle is quick to point out that actually there never was a crisis as the army was always involved. “Our delivery of security was always collaborative, because from the bid onwards it’s always underwritten by the Government and it is Government’s responsibility to deliver it.

Security operations

“The very nature of security means it comes at the end of the process. You can’t actually put your security in place until you know where your venues are, how the client groups will be moving around, what the transport plans are. In addition, you’ve got over 1,000 competition schedules to nail down, and more than 100 venues. The private tenders had been awarded – but the detailed planning continued through 2010-11 in collaboration with the Home Office, and the most important part was the contingency planning.

“If you look at our ability to be told on July 11 that the private company was not going to be able to deliver everything it thought it would be able to deliver – and, to be fair, this was as much of a shock to G4S as it was to anybody else – the speed in which we were able to turn it around was based upon fantastic partnerships with our stakeholders,

comms team again paid off. “When people had a go at transport about Games Lanes, we never saw Transport For London (TFL) saying: “That’s a LOCOG issue.” When wanting Londoners to change the way they went to work during the Games, we didn’t sit there and say: ‘Yup – that’s your job Peter Hendy and TFL.’ We all came in behind and delivered the messages; having a joined-up plan really helps you to do that.

“Sydney was very similar. Everyone was saying there is no way people are going to take public transport instead of cars. But of course they do and see how easy it is. The big challenge is always the second week of the Games. People go: ‘Oh well, no-one’s driving so this is great’, and they all get back in their cars!”

Dubbed the ‘social media games’, the organisers of London 2012 also faced a reputational risk – and Brock-Doyle believes that the rise of social media has empowered people. But, she adds: “Tweets are not always accurate – people’s perceptions and their prejudices as to what’s happening around them come through very quickly – so if you are a 24/7 operation, you have to be geared up and plan for it. You no longer have the luxury of time and anyone who doesn’t know that is living in a cave.”

Being able to respond quickly was vital in dealing with trending topics, from inflammatory comments by athletes, diplomatic gaffes such as the playing of the wrong anthems, to more serious personal and reputational threats. Equally, digital media was used to provide traffic alerts, Games results and interact directly with the public to help people get the most out of the experience.

When it came to the Paralympics, Brock-Doyle is keen to quash any notion that they were in any way seen as the ‘lesser Games’. She points to research that showed massive interest and excitement in the Paralympic Games all the way through the process, with a million tickets sold before the start of the Olympics.

“The one thing that we did so differently from many other Games was that we didn’t deliver this for the Olympics and then think, ‘Now, let’s start again’. We delivered something extraordinary for the Paralympics that was then adapted for the Olympic Games.... It’s always been at the forefront, we’ve always known it’s going to be big and a massive game changer.

“For us a great deal of the integration of both those Games was really important, so a huge chunk of our operational planning was done for the Paralympic Games – making sure accessibility was built-in.”

She cites the giant press conference room built for the Paralympics, which had a ramp so everybody could get up on the stage,

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also decide who was going to be the lead on it – if there was an incident about public safety or security, it would be led by the Met Police. By developing their lines, they knew there would be three or four other organisations that would have an interest in what they were going to say.”

The MIG also decided who would have the final say on any issue: “It was very, very quick so we didn’t have to sit and go through 20 organisations that were sitting there in the room.”

The MIG interfaced with the Government’s communications set-up, ensuring that all 19 government departments involved with delivering the Games had the right information and could get fast and rapid response lines.

In the event, the main security-related crisis

government and military and the fact that we had contingency plans in place. The security operation didn’t change at all, the only thing that changed was the mix. So instead of having a predominantly G4S workforce at the beginning, we went to a predominantly military one.

“But we could never have done this so seamlessly if we hadn’t had good plans in place, good contingency plans and a massive grasp on person-by-person; we knew who they were, where we needed them, what time and what they were going to do – and they did a brilliant job,” she adds.

The other tough area was transport and persuading Londoners to change their commuting habits, but the close relationship that had built up over the seven years within the



Top: Tower Bridge was adorned with the Olympic rings during the Games. Middle: Crowds coming out of the Stratford exit/entrance of the main stadium. Bottom: People lucky enough to get tickets spoke of the incredible atmosphere inside the stadium

Gracie Broom

and further ramps for camera positions needed for people with wheelchairs. This was what was used for the Olympic Games.

The risks were the same, but there were fewer Games Makers and less security involved because the size of the Paralympics was far smaller, with 64 countries and 4,500 athletes, compared to 205 countries and 10,000 athletes for the Olympics. In addition, the venues were primarily in the East End of London, so the nature, the size and scale were different.

Looking back, the obvious question is whether anything could have been improved upon. Brock-Doyle hesitates, wary of sounding arrogant, but then firmly states that a lot of things needed to be done when they were needed to be done.

What advice would she give particularly to those working in a communication environment?

“Your partnerships with the comms teams and with the other stakeholders are vital. You cannot deliver a consistent and effective communication plan if you’re trying to learn about the key people in the Met Police six months out from the Games. We all worked together for seven years, building up respect in the tasks and the challenges we faced – and ended up as friends! Communication people have a natural understanding of the sheer exuberance and hell that you can go through. So being able to work with them, and articulate and deliver with them, is vitally important and it’s the one thing that I would say you must never ever scrimp and save on. You can’t do this without them. People will change – but if it becomes indoctrinated in those organisations that you have to work together, then you will all work together when it really matters.”

Brock-Doyle is contracted through to March 2013 to help with the Legacy stage – and admits that then she will be looking for something else. “I think I’m probably the only Comms Director to have lasted certainly a summer Games from beginning to end, and certainly any Games from the bid through to the end. So I think that’s my lot, which is rare. “I’m going to have a rest and am available for any exciting and interesting job offers!” she laughs, passionate to the last. **CRJ**

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