

# DISPATCHES™

*Insights On Brand Development From The Marketing Front*

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Sunday, August 24, 2008

Have you been watching the coverage of the XXIX Olympic Games from Beijing? If you are like me you may not be getting as much sleep as you'd like, or need for that matter. In the United States we get early morning coverage and evening coverage that goes very late into the night. But who can turn-off the TV and get to bed with all the drama and excitement inherent in the personal histories and world-class performances?

One of the most exciting events was the men's final in the 400-meter relay (4X100) swim competition. The US won, shattering the world record established in 2006 by more than 4-seconds. This is a sport where one-tenth of a second is a big deal. Their performance is nothing short of astounding! Yet the US team just barely beat the French, who also bested the previous world record. Can you name the country that took third place and a bronze medal? Why not? They also finished under the previous world record. So did the fourth and the fifth place finishers in this event. That's right. Five teams recorded times that beat the previous world record yet only three teams advanced to the podium to be awarded medals.

World Record	3.12.23
USA	3.08.24
France	3.08.32
Australia	3.09.91
Italy	3.11.48
Sweden	3.11.92

(For more on this exceptional performance go to )

Can you imagine breaking a world record? That's great! But in this case it's not good enough to win a medal!! But then that's the nature of competition. It's not merely an absolute but a relative thing. It's not enough to be good, or even great, but one must be good enough (i.e., greater) in order to win. There's little consolation in your absolute performance, no matter how great, if it is not a winning one relative to the competition.

It's the same in the business world. Fail to place as one of the top few in the customer's "evoked set" and you are out of the competition. And we are not referring to mere awareness. Instead we are talking about the need to being meaningfully differentiated and preferred relative to your competition. If you are not up there in the customer's mind it takes a lot of extra work merely to be noticed no less be considered. Return on investment in marketing initiatives takes a nosedive. Fail to live-up to expectations foisted upon you by others or your own foolish proclamations (the captain of the French team is on record as saying they would "smash" the Americans) and you will be punished. You may be passed-over for promotion, fail to get the pay raise or bonus you believe you deserve, humbled, etc. And, the company's stock price could take a dive as analysts

and stockholders reflect their disappointment and disapproval.

While we heartily applaud many organizations for establishing “marketing excellence” training programs in order to enhance the competencies of their marketing team members we feel that too often they settle for “good.” Specifically, marketing excellence is about bringing the organization up to some pre-established norm. But the “norm” is not the embodiment of excellence. It is the expected. It’s the average. It’s just so hum-ho and pedestrian. Excellence takes performance to a higher level. It puts people and the organization in a position to win – on a consistent basis. It creates a culture of achievers who are not satisfied with the norm, or simply to be great, but to be greater.

### **BOATS & HELICOPTERS:**

Here are some things from the wide world of sports we can use to inspire and apply to achieve winning performance in the marketplace:

1. **Create a goal** – What is it you hope to achieve? Is it to make this year’s forecast or to create a leadership brand? Make your vision inspirational. Identify what you hope to achieve and make it “stretch” (i.e., going well beyond what is expected or judged reasonable) objectives. As the late Leo Burnett, founder of the agency that bears his name, stated, “if you reach for the stars you won’t come up with a hand full of dirt.” Don’t just plan to break a world record, plan to shatter it. Build-in sub-goals that will enable you to progress to your overarching goal. The late Jim Valvano, coach of the North Carolina State University Wolfpack, set a goal for his team to achieve a prime time televised position as the game of the week at the famed Madison Square Garden in New York. At the time this meant that your team was perceived as one of the marquee teams in the country. It was hard enough to gain an appearance at Madison Square Garden, even harder to be in a game chosen to be televised, but harder yet to go prime time. The team went prime time and then went on to become the 1983 men’s NCAA basketball champions.
1. **Be determined to “win”** – While business is not totally a zero-sum game you need to score more than the competition if you are going to reach the coveted podium to receive a medal. In this case the podium is a metaphor for recognition, customer devotion, premium value perception, ability to attract capital (as in marketing support funding), favorable stock price, etc. One cannot settle or compromise on winning. As the late legendary coach Vince Lombardi of the championship Green Bay Packers, who epitomized winning, told his players “show me a good loser and I’ll show you a loser.” To him winning wasn’t everything but the **only** thing. Nor was winning a sometimes thing but an every time thing. He expected the best from his players. Do you have the determination and grit to become a winner? If not there are undoubtedly others who do and will use your lack of determination to feather their (bird) nest!
2. **Have a plan** – Wishing, hoping and aspiring are not enough. You have to develop a plan to maximize your strengths and overcome your weaknesses – both personally and organizationally. Conduct a rigorous analysis going beyond the conventional wisdoms of the organization and the small-minded manager, that typically don’t matter a twit, to determine what is really needed to achieve your goal. We can only imagine the planning

that went into Michael Phelps development. Even harder to imagine is the planning for his week of competition during the Olympics. His performance was no accident. It was carefully planned from his boyhood through the weeklong competition he endured as a young man – training, conditioning, technical proficiency, nutrition, sports psychology, racing strategy, time management and even rest, among other critical success factors. Nor can planning take place in a vacuum. It must be in the context of very talented and capable competition if you are going to be good enough to win. Michael Phelps won big – not just once but eight times over setting world records in seven of the events in which he competed.

3. **Work your plan** - It's not enough to train for individual performance. Individual performance needs to fit into organizational performance. It's not good enough to train for developing a brand positioning strategy. The learnings need to be applied to develop a positioning strategy for each of the products or services in the organization. Train for the key functional tasks the organization needs to accomplish in an integrated way. Follow training with application on a real time basis. Performance needs to be institutionalized in order to build organizational competencies. Otherwise you may, at best, create a few individual stars (although we doubt it would be more than a one or two at best) but fail to create a winning team that builds on and reinforces the performance of the team. It's not enough to be a star, although that's within your reach, but to come together as an organization (with all its interconnected processes and disciplines) to become a perennial winner.
4. **Learn from your performance** – Inspect what you expect. Identify variances in performance and conduct a thoughtful analysis to get at the causal factors for any deviation. Adapt and take remedial action to get back on track. This requires building feedback mechanisms into the organization. It also requires a thorough understanding of the business, a thirst for unshakable facts and the development of sound hypotheses supported by objective research. No excuses. Make it real and improvements in performance will follow for the individual, brand and organization. Individual athletes and teams alike analyze their performance and adapt as needed to win. American gymnast Jonathon Horton realized he would need to change his routine on the high bar in order to win a medal. He upped the degree of difficulty by choosing different techniques than originally planned, performed brilliantly, and won the silver medal.
5. **Stay focused** – Winning isn't easy although athletes like Usain “Lightening” Bolt, gold medal winner and world record breaker from Jamaica in three track events (the 100 and 200-meter sprints, and the 400-meter (4X100) relay) in Beijing, and Michael Phelps make it look so. Despite the apparent carefree, lighthearted nature of Usain Bolt he is every bit as dedicated as Michael Phelps to winning. Both have made significant sacrifices, along with friends and family members, to get where they are today. When things get tough we all tend to take the path of least resistance. This includes missing training, failing to follow the plan, rushing mindlessly from one activity to another, making excuses and, ever present in the corporate world, addressing email instead of the more challenging strategic planning. Don't let it happen. Focus on what is going to really matter.

Make winning an every time thing for you and your organization. Don't be great. Be greater! As the key copy words in the Visa ads proclaim, "Go World."

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