



Development of the mass participation Ocean Swim Series in New Zealand

Interview with Scott Rice, Director, Quantum Events Ltd,
Auckland, New Zealand

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Scott Rice, a former New Zealand representative swimmer, saw an opening in the marketplace to introduce open water swimming. With the popularity of multi-sport, triathlon, paddling, cycling and running in the country, Scott knew that ocean swimming would capture the sport participant's imagination. He started in 2003 with the King of the Bays 2.8km ocean swim on Auckland's North Shore. The following year the Auckland Harbour Crossing was introduced, with participants swimming from the North Shore across the harbour and finishing at the viaduct in Auckland's central business district.

By 2006 the State New Zealand Ocean Swim Series was in operation, with five events around the country, and in 2009 a sixth event was added to the series. The State NZ encourages people of all ages and abilities to take part: events now include a beginner's distance of 750m, a tag team relay and a 200m State Oceanskids for children aged 10 and under. As many as 1,500 swimmers participate at each stop in the series.

Through Quantum Events Ltd, in 2005 Scott created the Beach Series, which takes place over 16 weeks in the summer for ski paddlers, stand-up paddlers, waka-ama [outrigger canoe] paddlers,

runners and swimmers. Close to 500 people attend the weekly Tuesday night gathering at Takapuna Beach on Auckland's North Shore.

Quantum Events is the event management company which produces both the State New Zealand Ocean Swim Series and the Beach Series. Scott and his wife Natasha, who has also had a major part in working within Quantum Events, are now joined by four full-time staff and contractors working on various aspects of the business.

GD: What is the role of the pro/elite athletes in this race from a marketing point of view?

SR: They can provide the aspiration aspect for younger swimmers. Athletes can benchmark their abilities against these athletes, and this is a sport where you can line up next to the best in the world and compete. From a media point of view, their presence creates some hype around the event and assists in creating 'sporting celebs' in ocean swimming. This allows the events to cultivate an international field as well as to highlight the homegrown heroes.



GD: How different would the race be if it only had the age-groupers?

SR: From a media point of view, this is hard. We like to provide a human interest story in each of our events that focuses on an 'age-group athlete/celebrity', but like any sport on TV, people like to see the performance of the top athletes and see how the event unfolds. We do recognise the elite swimmers might grab the headlines, but what motivates us as organisers is the everyday kiwis that choose the State NZ Ocean Swim Series as their motivation, their goal, as they look to make a change in their lives.

GD: What impact would it have on the viability of the event with only age-groupers?

SR: There is a viability of the event without elite competitors. We are talking about 10 to 15 athletes who could be considered elite in a field of up to 1,500. The elite field provides the opportunity for coverage in newspapers and television that you would have to work a lot harder to achieve in a social event.

GD: What tensions may exist between catering to the elite field and the large age-group field?

SR: In the Ocean Swim Series there aren't any tensions that I can think of – there is usually a major difference in [physical] abilities, so at the start of the race they tend to clear away very quickly. The only issue in the Ocean Swims may come in a two-lap course, where faster swimmers are lapping slower swimmers, which at the end of the race can be the difference between first and second.

GD: What is the role of the celebrity entrant?

SR: For our event the celebrity plays a role where an event such as this becomes real and achievable to anyone – if a [local television drama] Shortland Street star can do it or a member of parliament, then a 'so can I' mentality exists. We also like to provide a

training diary of the celebrity so people can see that these people will go through many of the same challenges. The celebrity entrant also plays a role by bringing multiple levels of media and PR.

GD: How has the age-grouper changed over time? Skill level? Expectations? Demands?

SR: The range of abilities has increased as the barriers to entering an event have been broken down. We offer different distances and also the long swim event is broken down into waves based on time, so each swimmer is given the best opportunity possible to take on the challenge. The demands on the event have increased as we have to provide increased safety levels on the water [via Surf Life Saving New Zealand] and volunteers to support the event. The actual competitor expectations I don't think have changed as we still have to provide a good product to them.

GD: How large could the field become? What are the constraints to expansion?

SR: There aren't really any restrictions on how large the events could get – as Surf Life Saving New Zealand is in charge of the safety of the event then the limitation would be based around the availability of resources to give the competitors. We do have cut-off times for our events, so as long as people fall between the generous bands then there is no reason why the events can't continue to grow. Numbers have generally grown each year and compared to when the events first started, there is more event competition with entry-level triathlons, other swimming events. Our competitors know exactly what they are getting with the events that we run.

GD: What is the relationship like between the events and the host communities?

SR: This is one of the key parts to holding events in the local councils and communities, as their support is very important. Each event will have a number of



competitors who will travel around the country to take part, but then the majority of the attendees will come from the local area. The key to us is to inform the communities of the range of events that are on offer and show people that this is an achievable and fun event to be involved in. If we can do this then we hope that each year these people will continue to be involved and introduce friends and family to this sport. There is a strong economic benefit to the host communities for holding these events though accommodation and local spend.

GD: What is the role of the Sky TV broadcast of the events?

SR: It brings the event to a much larger community. This year our television coverage for Sky and TV1 had just over 350,000 viewers, which clearly helps to promote the sport and shows the opportunity for people to get involved in the event. During the coverage we usually show our celebrity and small pieces of the other events that are on during the day, while also highlighting the competitive end of the race.

GD: How do you manage to keep all the athletes and the sponsors happy?

Sponsors: We have a great relationship with our sponsors and we clarify their objectives at the beginning of the season and then they leverage the events to achieve these objectives. Each sponsor is treated individually and is provided with various marketing opportunities, which they can pursue to optimise their sponsorship.

Athletes: For event organisers these days the event can easily be judged by what their entry cost is and then what they get from their race pack. Sponsors often provide the gifts, offers and opportunities for the athletes to judge whether the event was good value for money. We like to provide a series gift to each competitor at their first race, which definitely shows good value for money if the [suggested retail price] of

these goods is over half of the entry cost or it provides them with a piece of memorabilia or merchandise that rewards the individual for their achievement.

GD: How do you protect your sponsors?

SR: One thing that we are very clear on is exclusivity to our sponsors at our events so they can be provided with the greatest opportunity to leverage their involvement. With our event marketing we include these sponsors, so it is clear who the sponsors are. We also ensure that no other non-sponsor competing brands have access to the event site.

GD: Where do you look for new ideas? New innovations?

SR: Ocean Swimming is the type of event where opportunities for various areas to swim are endless but the limitations are timing (limited season), staff resources... and cannibalisation of competitor numbers from your own events are a potential threat. At the moment the State NZ Ocean Swim series has six events [one each month from November to April], which is a great number and challenging enough for people to complete the whole series. Therefore the opportunity to us as event organisers is to consider the types of events that we have on offer at the event or the course that competitors swim.

People love achieving certain courses, such as swimming the Auckland Harbour. (Every New Zealander can visualise and comprehend this achievement and satisfaction the individual must get from doing this.) We need to create this at each event location.

GD: If you could get any one person to compete at one of the events who would it be and why?

SR: Michael Phelps [and] Ian Thorpe for media awareness and motivation for thousands of kiwis to be on the start line with them. This adds to event credibility.



Interview: Scott Rice

GD: How does the Beach Series fit in with the Ocean Swim series?

SR: The Beach Series is a completely different event – just run by the same company. The Beach Series is the biggest weekly multi-sport event in the country, attracting on average 497 people. The event does have a swimming option so can provide Auckland competitors with the opportunity to experience and train at an Ocean Swimming event on a weekly basis. The Beach Series swimming distance is 1,000-1,500m, where the longest ocean swim race is 2.8-3.3km and shorter events on offer are 1,000m

and 300m. The event is very family and community orientated. Mum, dad and the kids can come down and all take part in separate events and enjoy the evening. There is something for everyone. It's a challenge, but achievable with the right preparation and support on the day. I love seeing the grins on people's faces as they cross the finish line and feel that sense of achievement. The Beach Series does provide a good feeder to the New Zealand Ocean Swim Series and gives us the ability to market the Ocean Swim event to the Beach Series participants.

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