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An Interview with Maggie White, Business Manager Olympic Games for the Australian Tourist Commission

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Introduction

One of the most significant innovations to emerge from Sydney's hosting of the 2000 Olympic Games has been the way that Australian tourism organisations have built the Games into their marketing strategies. At a recent press conference in Sydney, Michael Payne, the Director of Marketing for the International Olympic Committee, commented: "It is great to see the tourist industry fully taking advantage of the opportunity of hosting the Olympic Games. It is the first time that a national tourist organisation has taken advantage of hosting the Games before the Games have been held. It is really a model that I hope we can take forward."

As the Business Manager Olympic Games for the Australian Tourist Commission (ATC), Maggie White is the woman who has made it happen. She is responsible for the ATC's ambitious international Olympic tourism marketing program, which was launched in 1996 with a four-year budget of Australian \$12 million. Here she talks to Dr Laurence Chalip of Griffith University, about her role and the challenges she faced.

LC: Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed. It seems that the most central question is how the ATC first recognised the Olympic opportunity. What is the basis for the ATC's role?

MW: Australia had a number of events back in the late '80s including the 1988 Bicentennial celebrations. We also had Expo in Brisbane, so there was quite a focus on events in this country. When the New South Wales government and the Australian Olympic Committee expressed interest in putting in a bid for Sydney to host the 2000 Olympic Games, we were interested what that could do for Australia as a destination. At that stage, our job was to be a support mechanism for the bid. Very small; very low key.

Of course, when Sydney won the bid in September 1993, there was great excitement throughout the tourism industry, and I guess it was then that we tried to get a grasp of what this opportunity was. The ATC then started to think really seriously about what we, as an organisation, would do with the Olympics. Obviously, the first thing to do was go back and survey and research past Olympic Games destinations – how they had handled tourism. I have to say, in all honesty, there was very little data out there. I guess, that's understandable in some respects because the summer Olympics are only held every four years. We were fortunate that Barcelona's experience really started to help us develop and identify what potential tourism opportunities could be for the destination as a host of the Olympic Games. So, we started there. ➤

**LC: How did your role develop?**

MW: In July 1995 ATC management decided that a dedicated business unit to focus on the Olympics was required – to focus its energies on the Olympic Games from a tourism perspective. That's when I came into the picture.

LC: Ok, let's review a bit about the Australian Tourist Commission in terms of what its funding is and who its key stakeholders are.

MW: The ATC is a statutory authority. We have a Board of Directors, and report to the Minister for Tourism at federal government level. We have some autonomy, but we also have a lot of responsibility to the government. We get government funding and we get quite a bit of funding from industry in co-operative marketing campaigns. We are not a membership body; we are very much working hand-in-hand with the industry on co-operative campaigns. Primarily, our task is to build the Australian brand, so that's where we target our advertising campaigns. We use TV, print, cinema and the Internet.

LC: So, in the context of your mission and your activities what did you see as the key opportunities around the Olympic Games?

MW: Around the Olympic Games, it was mostly the opportunity for additional publicity for Australia. It is very important to keep that in context because – whilst the general level of awareness of Australia around the world varies from market to market – it was important for us to add depth and dimension

to people's impressions about the country. It's about being more than just sun, sea, sand, friendly people and cute animals, which often is the perception of many people around the world.

If you look back at the history of promoting Australia, we haven't had the long history of somewhere like Italy or the benefits of Hollywood from the USA perspective. It goes back to the 1980s when the government decided to invest more funds in tourism promotion internationally – predominantly through the ATC. It was also a time when the Australian film and wine industries started to take off.

So, the general challenge has been to add depth and dimension to what we call "brand Australia", and the ATC over the last six to eight years have invested enormous amounts of funds in research – who are our customers, what are their expectations about Australia, what are their expectations about having a holiday in Australia. So, working on that basis, we have been able to come up with this thing called "brand Australia". We've promoted lots of characteristics to show Australia as a colourful, bright, youthful, spirited destination. We've taken those characteristics and integrated them into our various campaigns, whether it's our print advertising, TV advertising, or any of our other consumer or trade marketing.

That's how we saw the Olympics. They're an opportunity to accelerate Australia's awareness around the world, and, at the same time, add depth and dimension. With the Olympics, there is a focus on the host city and country. That was our vision.

We also saw the vision as being an oppor-



tunity to work with non-traditional tourism industry partners as well. To that end, our first target was Olympic partners – the sponsors. We went out to them and said: “You’ve paid millions to build your brand using the Olympic rings. The Games in 2000 will be held in Sydney; you will have some association with that. So, why don’t we work together to get a common result.” It’s a fairly powerful combination because the research we’ve done about Australia shows that people are very favourably disposed towards it but may not necessarily know a lot about it.

LC: Well, that raises the issue of image change. It seems that one of the concerns has been to create an image for Australia that is more developed and sophisticated. How does that link with the Games?

MW: Some of our key stock in trade with the Olympic Family has been our image – more importantly, our video footage and still images. For instance, if an organisation wants to make a TV commercial featuring Australia, or if they are wanting to do documentaries, features, or series on the country, we have made video footage available. We have been very very disciplined about this – going out and shooting the images that we want people to see, things we want portrayed around the world from a marketing point of view. We say: “OK, you can have access to these.” So there is consistency. We don’t have a situation where we, as the ATC are taking Australia in one direction, and meanwhile the sports directors or broadcasters or sponsors are taking Australia in another. We don’t want a traditional mindset like

the Crocodile Dundee of the ‘80s when, in actual fact, we’ve moved on.

But having images is only one thing. More importantly, what sits underneath that is all the story ideas. Over the last three years, we have put an enormous amount of resources into developing different story ideas and lines about what sits under this thing called “brand Australia”. That’s where you start to get this changeover in people’s images and perceptions of a destination – that there is more to it. We do have interesting architecture and the Olympic design, particularly Sydney Olympic Park, has created a great deal of interest amongst the architectural gurus around the world. Our food and wine are also getting positive comments. Our interesting arts scene, as well as our indigenous culture. So we are not just going back to that mono-dimensional description that I mentioned earlier.

We tend not to use the word “sophisticated”. There’s an Australian style, and that’s what is often appealing to visitors.

We’ve also seen it as an opportunity to develop high yield meetings, incentive, conventions, and exhibition sectors as well. Over the last ten years, Australia has put into place an extensive infrastructure in that particular area. We say that if we can host an Olympic Games, we are obviously very well equipped to host prestigious meetings or conventions.

LC: Can you elaborate a little bit further on the way that the Olympics tie into this effort to change Australia’s image?

MW: All along, we’ve never treated the Olympics in isolation. It goes back to the ➤



development of our strategic plan in 1995. We said: "OK, we have a core operating plan as an organisation. We do publicity; we do advertising; we do information servicing; we work with the travel industry." So, we took that core and we asked ourselves how we could integrate the Olympics into it. Of course, what it came down to was to enhance Australia's image. We had to work with the broadcast rights holders on the publicity side, as well as the Olympic partners and some of the National Olympic Committee sponsors.

On the information distribution side, if you go out and create lots of awareness, it's important that you are very well set up to handle the expected increase in requests for information on the destination. I always say that I'm glad I've worked on an Olympic Games with the Internet, because otherwise we probably would have drowned in requests for information. The Internet certainly accelerates things; it helps with information servicing.

So, we took all our functional areas and integrated the Olympics into them. It was not so much promoting the 17-day Olympic event in September; it was more about who are the members of the Olympic movement that we could best work with. They needed to increase their business but at the same time we needed to suit our objective, which is to increase the profile of Australia and to increase business to Australia over the long term.

It was also important to disperse that business Australia-wide, and not just be focused on Sydney. Our objective is very much on the national interest.

LC: You mentioned sponsors and you've mentioned the media. What other key organisations or business areas did you identify?

MW: Within the Olympic Family, from a travel industry perspective, you've got tour operators who were nominated by the National Olympic Committees to sell packages to the Games. In most instances those organisations were events specialists. They know from one event to another how to sell packages including accommodation and tickets. In a couple of instances companies have expanded into the leisure market by featuring Australia as part of their leisure travel program. That's been a plus for our destination.

Most of the organisations that will be selling packages to the Olympic Games in Australia have very little knowledge of Australia; they are not traditional Australian specialists. So we set out to assist those, where possible, to ensure they have the right information on the country and the images they need for their brochures. We've been there to support their efforts.

We've also worked with some of the National Olympic Committees. Whilst they aren't marketing organisations, they have their own sponsors and their own groups of media. In the main, the National Olympic Committees have been ready to open doors for us to their sponsors so we can go out and develop our own business relationships.

LC: What particular challenges presented themselves when doing this kind of work?

MW: There certainly have been challenges! That's been the fun side of the project. In the



early days it was important that we really understood what we were involving ourselves in. There's no doubt about it, the Olympics are a very complex vehicle. There are also a lot of issues – ambush marketing, all the organisations that want to get onto the Olympic band wagon who haven't signed sponsorship deals, things like that. Our lives have been made a lot easier in that particular area because we had input into the drafting of the legislation here in Australia regarding the use of Olympic words and symbols. And to ensure that tourism was really looked after, we had a degree of autonomy, but on the condition that we worked with SOCOG to ensure the Olympics issues were dealt with. I think we were able to overcome that challenge early by developing an understanding of what it was about and understanding the importance of the National Olympic Committees. They are the franchise holders of the Olympic rings. So, relationships in each of our markets with the National Olympic Committees were crucial.

The other challenge was sharing our vision with some of the organisations out there. We're a marketing organisation, so not a lot of people in the early days saw where we were going – what we wanted to do. There were challenges convincing some people that they should consider the Games here as an opportunity.

We never asked the sponsors for huge sponsorship deals. Our approach was that anything with them would be in co-operation and partnership. So, if it was something worthwhile pursuing, we didn't expect them to just hand over an amount of money. We

were keen to see how we could join together to do things. This is a very different approach to what sponsors have traditionally been used to. A lot of people think it's an amazing cash cow, and that the sponsors have got bucket-loads of money to go out and spend on various things.

We also did a lot of door knocking, gave lots of presentations, and attended lots of meetings to come up with the organisations that best fit with our product mix, and that could also fit us into their product mix. We found that we were able to bring lots of ideas to the table from a tourism perspective. That's where I think we've been very successful with some of the organisations. We also realised that we would not be in partnership with all the Olympic Partners. And we knew that it would vary from region to region as well. We had to see where their strategies are heading.

LC: Let's stay with that for a minute. In terms of working with the sponsors, have you been finding yourself sharing marketing information?

MW: Yes, certainly with the Olympic Partners that we have developed some business partnerships with. One in particular is Visa International. We have a global marketing agreement with Visa to promote Australia. They have been an excellent partner for the country, and they are certainly spending a great amount of money promoting Australia. Obviously, what we were able to share in the early days was some of the findings from our research on who our target audiences were – what they were looking for in terms of experience. ➤



So, that's been a useful exercise. It wasn't just the case of the national tourist office doing those pretty travel posters and sending out pretty booklets – great travel guides for great destinations. There is more to the Australian Tourist Commission than some other national tourist offices around the world, and we were very prepared to go into partnership with sponsors on promotions, rather than just do calendars and advertising in magazines. Most of the promotions we've done with these organisations tend to be about getting people to Australia – not just at Games time. We, as the ATC, bring to the table the airline partners, the hoteliers, the tour operators. So we can ask a sponsor: "What can you bring to the table?" And that's how we've gone about most of our partnerships right around the world.

LC: That's interesting because this is actually a new kind of relationship. Why have the sponsors found it to be in their interest to work with you?

MW: It's interesting when you talk to some of them that they've seen it as a win-win situation. It goes back to Australia's international image. It's also seen as an opportunity to grow their business to Australia. And certainly, with Visa for instance, the increase in spending from international visitors to Australia over the last 12 months has increased significantly. So, all these organisations need to see a business case. It's only natural; it's the same as ourselves. None of us have money to loosely throw around to campaigns that don't work or that it's just nice to do. So, I think that's really

been the advantage – some of these organisations are able to see returns on their business investment.

LC: So, in addition to you working with some of the Olympic sponsors and some of the travel companies for the Games, what other programs have you put into place?

MW: I guess a really good one is with the media – with the broadcast rights holders. We have a visiting journalists program, which was established back in the late '80s. That particular program we do in conjunction with the Australian tourism industry, and with the state tourist commissions. It has evolved over the years. It's highly targeted. It really fits in with our overall brand Australia objectives. It complements our advertising. The Visiting Journalists Program has increased significantly in the last three years. Some three years ago we were handling about 750 media into Australia on a worldwide basis to do stories about Australia. This year we probably will get close to 1,800. Without a doubt, the impact of the Olympics being in Sydney has had an effect on them coming down here. We can put that into perspective. Australians, in particular, think everyone wants to come down here. Whilst in the past we had worked with a lot of these media, and we had been trying to convince them to come down, the usual barriers to travel arise – yes we'd love to come down but it's too far away and we haven't got the time to do it and, in some instances, it's too costly. What the Olympics have done is to flip people over. They say: "OK, here is such an important event, we



can justify the time and whatever else it takes to come down.” And what we’ve said is: “Whilst you’re here, why don’t you do other things in Australia and that’s where we can help you. We can co-ordinate your visit to go to Queensland or South Australia or Victoria. You don’t need to deal with four different organisations.”

That’s how we started to leverage our association – particularly with the broadcast rights holders and also some of the lifestyle magazines, and even some business publications. We found that our brief has been much more than just tourism. It’s probably tended to be growing more into what we call “lifestyle”. You know, there is no point in having a demarcation and saying: “No, I’m sorry we can’t help you.” We say we can facilitate an introduction for someone to talk about Australia’s technology or where we are going with our environmental practices or whatever. That’s been quite an interesting exercise. And that has been backed up by our research over the last three years, which fits with that sort of program as well.

LC: What kind of results are you seeing?

MW: In the last financial year, publicity was in excess of A\$1 billion dollars for the country. What we’ve noticed in the last 18 months is a higher level of interest by electronic media. Before then, we’d have small numbers of television crews coming down, but in the last 18 months electronic media has really increased significantly, and that’s where you are getting greater publicity as well. When there is a half-hour program dedicated to Australia, it isn’t necessarily a

dedicated holiday program or leisure program. In Germany, there was a series of eight half-hour programs about Australia. That sort of thing tended to be quite unique and rare in the past, but because of the interest in the Olympics, we’ve found that Australia is quite hot with the media.

We’ve also been working very closely with the broadcast rights holders on their vignettes – what they are going to show during the Games coverage. We would like to ensure that it’s not just Sydney but also the rest of Australia that is shown. Or if they are doing a morning talk show or a special during the Games, we can provide images for that.

LC: Are there other programs that we should be highlighting?

MW: I think that probably covers the key Olympic specific ones. In March 1998, we launched a promotion called “Australia 2001, New Century, New World”, which links to the Australian Centenary of Federation next year, and encourages Australian corporations to hold their meetings in Australia in 2001 and capitalize on the profile of the Olympics. We don’t want to see a down-turn in business post-Games. It’s an ongoing campaign.

One other promotion probably worth mentioning is the Bank of America promotion. This is a 12-month nationwide promotion in the United States with Bank of America. It’s a travelling exhibition promoting Australia. There is no way that exhibition would have happened if we didn’t have the Olympic Games. Bank of America merged with Nations Banks and at the same time they ►



are a sponsor of the United States Olympic Committee. They wanted to go out to their constituents to say: "OK, we've merged. We can also help you. This is our firm, and this is the Olympics." What we were able to bring to the party, of course, is Australia and the Olympic connection.

LC: How much of the promotion features Olympic visuals or stories, and how much is about Australia?

MW: What tends to happen is that they open with an Olympics theme. Without a doubt Sydney Olympic Park has been splashed right around the world. However, it varies. Obviously, that will change around Games time, but in the lead-up I'd say it's about one-fifth Olympics and four-fifths destination. It's been quite interesting. Our moment is not during the Games. By the time the Games come, all our work will be over. I believe that's certainly been proven true because once the media descend upon Sydney in September, anything they air or publicise outside the Games needs to have been in the can well before then. It's all about timing.

LC: But there is that period after the Games – the 2001 campaign. How is that going?

MW: The "Australia 2001" campaign is targeting Australian corporations to bring people to Australia after the Games. It's very much targeted at the meetings market. We have worked very closely with all the convention bureaus Australia-wide who are working with corporate sectors after the

Games. We had talks about their respective destinations within Australia, and we encouraged them to supply material or information, to have a meeting here. The message is: "Australia is worth travelling to from overseas". We have excellent hotels; we have good meetings venues; you can have a really good meeting in Australia with a variety of destinations and experiences. It's been a long process to try and convince people that that is the way to go because Australians like to travel abroad, so trying to get them to stay in their own country can often be a challenge. It's a slow and gradual process. It hasn't been a heavy advertising campaign; it's mostly been by direct market and identifying corporations – working with the meetings industries here within Australia to target organisations, to hold their meeting out here. It's a targeted promotion; it's touching people's heart strings and touching people's national pride.

LC: So how do the Olympic Games fit into that post-Olympic strategy?

MW: After the curiosity and interest in the host city and the host country it is important we capitalise on it. We're building on that.

LC: The Sydney Media Centre, is one of the great innovations of the Sydney Olympics. Could you say a bit about what that is and what you perceive your role to be?

MW: With the Olympics there are always accredited media and non-accredited media. The non-accredited media tend to be looking for lifestyle or human interest stories



because they don't get access to the sports. As we all know, it's sports that dominate during the Olympic Games. One of our lessons from Atlanta was that it's important that all media are looked after. We learnt that first-hand as we had a presence in Atlanta to see how the media worked out over there. In Atlanta there were six or seven different facilities set up for media scattered around town. There didn't seem to be one coordinated area where non-accredited or accredited media could come if they wanted non-sport information or stories or press conferences. So, in conjunction with the federal government and the state government, a partnership was formed to develop this one venue for that purpose – the Sydney Media Centre. The ATC is a partner in the whole exercise. It's really a service centre plus a hospitality facility so the media have got somewhere to service their needs, and we can show them what Australia's got to offer.

LC: So, how does that fit into your overall leveraging strategy?

MW: I guess it's only a very small component. As I mentioned in my earlier comments, people will see the images that will be beamed around the world, the special series, and the extra publicity. All this has been filmed pre-Games. During the Games, we will be there for people who come in and want information. They may never have been to Australia before, and they may want to visit a couple of places after the Games. It's one component, as I say. But if you don't look after the media you know we will be in major strife. We are very dependant on pub-

licity for this country. So, it's important that the media are looked after.

LC: It sounds like you have been trying to incorporate your strategies for the Games into the ATC's overall strategy. How have you coped with bringing the Olympic Games into everything you are doing – into the overall operations of the ATC?

MW: That's a very interesting question. I haven't cloned myself, though sometimes I've felt like it. What we've tended to do in most of our regions is to appoint an Olympic specialist as a key contact. But at the same time, we've really had to stay focused on our core business because, as we say, there is life beyond the Olympics. Come October, the caravan moves on to the next destination. So, yes it's created an extra workload for the organisation – a massive increase.

We were fortunate in that the federal government gave us an extra A\$12 million over four years for Olympic-related marketing. There was no way we could have done what we've done if we didn't have extra funds. It's one thing to go out and expect lots of charity, but we had the money to build relationships. With the broadcast rights holders, you need money to develop the resources and the packages. I guess it's been an interesting challenge for us. We've been fortunate to employ people on a contract basis. Resources have been a big juggle.

We've also tried to work smarter. Technology has played a great role in that, and I've also learnt to drop something if it doesn't work. If the personalities weren't there or we were spending tremendous ➤



amounts of time for a very small return on investment, we had to move on. That's important with the Olympics because you can get caught up in the hype. We always have to stay focused on what our core objectives are and what our strategy is, and not get distracted. It's very easy to get derailed.

LC: You can get caught up in all the enthusiasm around the Games.

MW: Enthusiasm or controversy, anything that's out there. At the end of the day our role was to develop awareness of the country. We had to remain focused on the big picture, rather than being drawn into the operations area.

LC: When people think about tourism and the Olympics, they usually think about the people that come to the Games, but everything we've talked about is really positioning the destination in the long term. How much focus has there been on the Olympic visitor versus the broader matter of positioning the country?

MW: We did lots of research. There was so little data from past Olympic destinations. We started to put things in perspective when we started to look at major events around the world. Major events primarily attract domestic visitation. So, we did not put all our energies into Olympic visitors for the 17 days of the event. We saw that as one element the relationships with the official tour operators, the sponsors, the Olympic Family. At the end of the day, the event is here and gone after 17 days. What's really the legacy is the relationships that the Olympics

brought to this country. There would be no way of creating some of those relationships if we didn't have the Olympic Games. Of course, the visitors to the Games are important, but over the course of a year, they are only a small blip on the scale. You have to keep it in perspective. The Games will give us an extraordinary profile. People will see what Australia and Sydney can do. There's a lot more to Australia as a nation.

LC: Say a little bit more about the new relationships.

MW: Certainly. We've always said we are a much different organisation than we were four years ago. We've had to be a little bit more ambitious; we've had to be a little bit braver – going out and talking to organisations that we haven't traditionally talked to. We realised we had common objectives with many of these organisations. So, I believe some of those partnerships will go on post-Games. Others probably won't, but often relationships with the people will. In a lot of cases someone might move to another organisation. I suppose we all laugh here when we talk about networking, but it's when you've enjoyed a good working relationship with someone and they've moved on to another organisation, you can open another door for a potential new partnership. So, I guess it's thinking outside the square, because without a doubt the Olympics have been the most amazing area to develop contacts worldwide.

LC: Can you take some of your experience from the Olympics, and apply it to leverage other sports events?



MW: Yes. We'll be working with the 2002 Gay Games, and World Cup Rugby in 2003. These are very interesting niche markets. Where appropriate we'll work with the media and sponsors. But again, it's got to be kept in perspective. Everyone has their own objectives and agendas.

LC: Thank you!



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Biographies

Laurence Chalip is an Associate Professor in the School of Marketing and Management at Griffith University, where he convenes the Sport Management major and serves as Coordinator of Postgraduate Studies. Prior to joining Griffith University, he served as Director of the graduate program in sport management at the University of Maryland.

He has worked extensively in the Olympic Movement, including assignments with the International Anthropology Project at the Los Angeles Olympic Games and, subsequently, as a member of the Seoul Organising Committee for Olympic Cultural Performance and Research. He has been a lecturer at the International Olympic Academy, and has been invited to address special sessions at the Olympic Museum and the Centre for Olympic Studies (in Barcelona).

His research has been supported by grants from the Gerald R. Ford Foundation,

Hankook Ilbo, and the Cooperative Research Centre for Sustainable Tourism. He is a member of the Board of Directors for the Sport Management Association of Australia and New Zealand.

Maggie White is Business Manager Olympic Games for the Australian Tourist Commission. She is responsible for the ATC's ambitious international Olympic tourism marketing program, which was launched in 1996. The budget for the four-year program is A\$12million.

In conjunction with the ATC's overseas offices and business units Maggie works closely with Olympic members identifying business opportunities that will benefit the destination. This includes establishing relationships with key sponsors, media partners and tour operators involved in the Games. To date over A\$1 billion of promotional exposure for Australia has resulted from such alliances.

Maggie also works with the Sydney Organising Committee for the Olympic Games (SOCOG), the Sydney Organising Committee for the Paralympic Games and Sydney Olympic Broadcasting Organisation (SOBO) assisting with their international promotions and marketing efforts.

Maggie commenced with the ATC in 1989 and has had extensive international experience promoting Australia to the world. Prior to this, she worked in Inbound Marketing for one of Australia's tour operators.



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