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Olympic trials a year away, the race to sell spots is on

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The marketing campaign has just begun for the U.S. Olympic track and field trials that will be held in Sacramento in slightly more than a year.

Local organizers have set a goal of collecting \$1 million in national and local sponsorships.

National marketing has begun. Pitches to regional companies should start in about two months.

The trials for the 2000 Olympics team, which will be held July 14 to 23 at California State University Sacramento, are big. Athletes will be chosen to represent the United States at the 2000 Summer Olympics in Sydney, Australia.

The event is expected to attract 120,000 people over 10 days. Depending upon whose estimate you listen to, the trials could have an economic impact to the region of between \$8.5 million and \$25 million. Approximately 60 percent of the spectators are expected to come from outside the area. Visitors could spend an average of \$156 per day if they're staying in hotels.

The local organizing committee is the nonprofit Sacramento Region Sports Education Foundation, which operates under the name Sacramento 2000. John McCasey, head of the publicly supported Sacramento Sports Commission, which recruited the event, is in charge of Sacramento 2000.

The nonprofit, in turn, hired Charlotte, N.C.-based Raycom Sports to manage the sponsorship sales.

Members of the executive committee of USA Track & Field, the national governing body for the sport, were impressed with the progress when they visited last weekend, McCasey said.

Phased marketing plans: The first phase in attracting sponsorships is at the national level. The national sponsors of the U.S. Olympic Committee and USA Track & Field get first dibs on marketing opportunities. Such companies as Nike, United Airlines, Home Depot and General Motors have the exclusive rights to their particular category. There are a couple of dozen such companies.

Raycom Sports' staff in Old Sacramento is working with the Olympic Committee and USA Track & Field with those national sponsors. Part of that effort, said Steve Nieman, Raycom Sports director of sales and marketing, "is an education curve."

Some companies aren't as familiar with track and field as they are with the higher-profile sports of baseball, basketball and football. Corporate sponsors want to understand who the athletes are, where the trials have been held in the past and how big an event the trials can be, said Brian Flajole, Raycom Sports vice president.

The marketing crew must convince companies that exposure at an event of this magnitude can sell products and raise brand awareness.

Another part of the sell is the hospitality component. The marketers will stress that tickets to the Olympic trials are a nice "thank you" to clients and employees.

For out-of-town companies, they'll stress the proximity to San Francisco, Tahoe and Napa for the open days between competition. Some corporations will see the trials as an alternative hospitality event for clients, considering what it would cost to send clients to the Olympics in Australia, Flajole noted.

Phase two: The second phase will come after the official national sponsors accept or refuse sponsorship opportunities, and product categories open up for other companies. In some cases, corporate sponsors may decline, opening up marketing possibilities for their local offices. This phase needs to begin in two months because companies will start planning their budgets, Nieman said.

Raycom Sports has talked to some local companies as the firms call to inquire about marketing options. But, Nieman said, "We don't want to cross the line." He and Flajole can't make any promises yet until the national sponsors make their decisions.

Sponsorship packages: Many levels of sponsorship are available. There are eight charter sponsorships at \$125,000 a piece, offering more than a dozen features, including use of the Olympic track and field trials logo, a tent in the corporate village, tickets, luxury skybox seating, advertisements, parking, merchandise, slots in the Sacramento 2000 golf tournament and an excursion trip for clients during an off day.

Gold sponsorships cost \$50,000, offering some of the same components, minus the skybox seats and use of the logo. Next comes the silver sponsorships at \$15,000, with tickets, advertising, parking passes, gifts and other items.

Numerous other individual sponsorships will be for sale, such as sponsoring a dinner, reception, a monthlong photographic exhibit or a traveling kiosk. There also will be program advertisements, ad space on the back of tickets and on volunteers' uniforms, and a corporate village in which companies can display their products or services.

Unlike the Ladies Professional Golf Association's Longs Drugs Challenge that Raycom Sports owns and operates in Lincoln, companies' ability to buy sign space within Hornet Stadium is limited because of the rights held by the Olympic Committee and NBC, Flajole said.

Facing challenges: Selling the trials to sponsors is challenging because track and field isn't as high profile as baseball, football or basketball. And because it's only a one-time event, Raycom Sports has only this one opportunity to sell.

On the other hand, companies may be more willing to pump in sponsorship dollars because they know they'll have more time to get in clients or employees over the 10 days.

But the event marketers are working in a city that's not exactly known for corporate headquarters.

Track and field will get plenty of attention, said Larry Eder, publisher of several track and field magazines, including American Track & Field and California Track & Running News.

Track and field has a huge fan and participant base in California, Eder said. The fastest-growing high school sport is girls track and cross country. And the events are great for kids, because star athletes have been known to sit and sign autographs for hours. And sponsor companies like the diverse demographics at the meets.

"When people think of the Summer Olympics, they think of track and field," Eder said.

Sacramento's relative paucity of corporate headquarters is not the issue, said County Supervisor Roger Dickinson.

"We will have good response from companies here in Sacramento -- even those that aren't headquartered here," Dickinson said. The question is not whether local companies will buy in, but "it will be at what level they will participate. This is a great opportunity for companies in the Sacramento area to participate in an event that's going to have an enormously high profile in our region."

The key to sponsorship success, Eder said, is to go after dollars in Silicon Valley.

"The opportunity for Sacramento is in technology," he said. Many high-tech companies have put big bucks into sporting events, including track and field.

"This isn't a Sacramento only event," McCasey added. "It's a national event."