

PRWEEK

NEWS

Campaigns: Product PR

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As the US Olympic Trials approached, Steve Furniss was stunned to hear that US Swimming (USS), which oversees the United States' Olympic swimming team, was planning to ban the use of full-body suits. After all, the sport's governing body, the Federation Internationale de Natation (FINA), had already approved the suits for the Sydney games - making the ban that much more frustrating.

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Furniss, a former Olympian, was counting on the Indianapolis trials to debut his Aquapel suit (dollars 200 retail), developed by TYR Sport, which he co-founded in 1985. Many swimmers believe that the suits cut down on water drag. US Swimming cited availability as the reason for the ban - mainly the result of market leader Speedo announcing that its suits would not be ready for the trials. Though both TYR and Adidas offered to outfit the athletes, Speedo balked and the ban was established on June 22. 'My goal was clear,' says Chris Wilmoth, PR manager for TYR. 'Get our story out to the public and demonstrate to them that US Swimming was being unjust.'

Strategy

From the outset, this campaign had all the makings of a great media story.

There was TYR, the entrepreneurial underdog, being smothered by the big-business tandem of Speedo and USS - all beneath the shadow of the Olympic flag. Plus, the suit was the biggest technological advance to come along in the sport in two decades. So Wilmoth had to do more than just tell the story, he needed to show people Aquapel.

Tactics

Enlisting the aid of a professional photographer and a graphic artist, Wilmoth assembled a media kit including a CD-Rom with high-resolution action shots, computer-designed illustrations and microscopic fiber digital files, a technical sheet, scientific data from flume testing, 35mm slides, prints and b-roll video for broadcast outlets.

Ten more releases were drafted over the next two weeks to keep key journalists abreast of the rapidly developing story. Mainstream media outlets targeted included the AP, Reuters, USA Today, the LA Times, MSNBC.com, Sports Illustrated, Time, Newsweek, NBC-TV in LA, Women's Wear Daily, NPR, CNN and others.

Realizing they were going to need a bigger rock to slay this slippery Goliath, TYR executives also filed a formal grievance with the US Olympic Committee. A resolution

was not reached within the required 48-hour period, so a request was then forwarded to the American Arbitration Association (AAA).

Results

Literally hours before the July 18 AAA hearing, US Swimming convened an emergency board meeting and reversed the ban. The group decided that because the international committee had already approved the suits, and because no competitive advantage to them has ever been proved, it had no choice. TYR quickly drafted a 'victory' release, which went out over the wires by 10 pm.

Columnist Bill Ward of the Tampa Tribune wrote that 'thanks to the controversy prior to the Sydney Olympics, (body suits) have become swimming's biggest public relations splash since Johnny Weissmuller strapped on a loin cloth to play Tarzan.'

Wilmoth claims over 250 print and broadcast outlets picked up the story around the world, including USA Today, CNN and the Los Angeles Times.

Additionally, as a result of the widespread coverage, Disneyland produced a Tomorrowland 'Innoventions' display featuring the suits.

Future

TYR will continue its outreach throughout the Sydney Games.