



COMPETING FOR THE GOLD!

BARUCH GRAD PLAYS KEY ROLE IN PROMOTING NYC OLYMPIC BID

BY KELLIE TABRON

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Long before any Olympic Games are held, a competition just as intense as any of the sporting events is being staged among cities vying to host the Games. In this competition, the key players are not dedicated athletes with dreams of gold medals, but whole organizations dedicated to promoting the cause of their host cities.

In New York, that organization is NYC2012, and one of the key players in its campaign to bring the Games to New York City is self-

described sports junkie, Lazaro Benitez. As manager of media relations for NYC2012, Benitez, at first glance, appears to be a surprising choice. The in-your-face, buy-my-product stereotype often associated with a public relations executive is replaced with a laid back pitch that is direct but polite and respectful.

Benitez began his career in public relations in high school, after landing a high school internship with Edelman Public Relations. "I sort

of fell into PR," he says. Benitez stayed with that firm for eight years, including four years during which he completed his education at Baruch College. "It wasn't what I planned to do [PR], but once I started learning about it, I got hooked," he says.

So how do this Washington Heights native and his NYC2012 colleagues plan to convince more than eight million big city residents that New York City needs an Olympic Games? With lots of hard work.



*Lazaro Benitez, media relations
manager for NYC2012.*



"This job is the most challenging I've ever had," Benitez says. An average day lasts 16-to-18 hours. He begins early, catching up on Olympics-related news, including stories relating to the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and competing cities' plans and progress. "I read about 12 hard-copy papers

own merits," he says. "There's nothing to be gained by disparaging the competition. We focus on espousing the pluses of our own plan."

Like any good political campaign, NYC2012 has specific messages it wants to get out, not the least of which is that, despite the scandals surrounding the 2002 Salt Lake City

public relations efforts, including forbidding its members from visiting bid cities during the selection process. Furthermore, according to the IOC's Web site and its Rules of Conduct, potential host cities are restricted from directly contacting IOC members or proactively approaching members of the interna-

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each morning and scan 20 or 30 others on the Web," says Benitez. "While our main focus is our own plan, we also need to know what other news is out there."

In addition to their morning immersion in the news, Benitez and his colleagues also spend their day talking to reporters, returning hundreds of phone calls, writing press releases and setting up, publicizing and attending events throughout the city. They work to get reporters to attend events, cultivating those interpersonal relationships that, according to Benitez, are very important in the publicity game. "It's more like a political campaign than anything else," he says. But Benitez says NYC2012's policy is to avoid bashing the competition. "Our mantra is whoever wins this race will win based on their

Winter Games, the U.S. is still a viable venue to host an Olympic Games. In the lead-up to the Salt Lake City Games, 13 Olympic officials were accused of accepting bribes from Salt Lake organizers in exchange for votes favoring the Utah city to host the Olympic Games. Four IOC members and two top Salt Lake City Olympic committee officials, President and CEO Frank Joklik and Vice President David Johnson, resigned in the scandal. Afterward, the IOC underwent a massive reorganization, and the U.S. Justice Department launched a probe against the USOC.

As a result of the scandal, the IOC had to focus both on getting rid of its reputation as a haute fraternity of freeloaders seeking kickbacks and lavish hotel stays, and on putting limits upon bidding cities'

tional press, except during designated times. From now until about six months before the 2012 Games host city is decided in 2005, the only way NYC2012 can interact with the foreign media is if a member of the foreign press approaches them directly.

To counteract the IOC rules, NYC2012's strategy has been to reach out to the 200-or-so daily and weekly newspapers that serve New York's various ethnic communities.

"While a paper may be small in terms of notoriety here in New York, it is likely to be read by the core ethnic group here in the city," says Benitez. "Chances are they call back home to speak with family, and the word gets out about what we're doing."

NYC2012 also targets the 126 IOC members who ultimately will cast the final

votes. They not only have to work to conquer any negative associations remaining from the Salt Lake scandal, but also to overcome longstanding perceptions that the IOC is an Eurocentric organization that generally awards the Games to European countries. In addition, no one knows how the U.S. State Department's policies and the invasion of Iraq will affect New York's cause. Perception problems can hamper a campaign.

One way NYC2012 is working to overcome these obstacles is by ensuring that its message reaches not only an American audience but an international one as well. "Obviously, we are the U.S. representative," says Benitez. "But beyond that, our strategy works to position New York as the world's second home, where we live the Olympic ideals of peoples of all races, religions and ethnic backgrounds coming together every day." Adds Benitez, "New York is already an Olympic Village. If you take the No. 7 train to Queens, you'll definitely see that."

"In the beginning, our strategy was multi-pronged," he explains. "We went after every single audience out there, making our spokespeople available to all of our constituents from the very large to the very small." Benitez says the team's goal is to run

a campaign that is completely open to the public and, by extension, the media. The NYC2012 team maintains that its approach helps to promote a sense of credibility and trust not generally associated with major campaigns, political or otherwise. Not only do those mouthpieces include the standard public relations and media team representatives like himself and executive director Jay Krieger, but also NYC2012's founder and current deputy mayor for economic development, Dan Doctoroff.

Doctoroff conceived the idea of hosting the Games after attending the 1994 World Cup Soccer semifinals at Giants Stadium in New Jersey's Meadowlands Sports Complex. In forming NYC2012, he led the planning, marketing, community and government relation efforts and continues to act as the city's lead representative in the effort to secure the Games. In his current role as deputy mayor, Doctoroff oversees the planning and implementation of the policies that affect New York's economy, and coordinates efforts to retain, attract and expand the business community. Among his most important responsibilities is the oversight of New York's physical and economic response to the Sept. 11 terrorist

attacks, coordinating with government agencies at the city, state and federal level and with the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation to redevelop the World Trade Center site.

In 2002, NYC2012 moved its offices to Lower Manhattan from its Midtown Park Avenue location, in a show of support for the area's revitalization. But at the same time, it is careful not to hang its bid on the tragedy of Sept. 11. "We are adamant about not winning the host city designation on the basis of sympathy," Benitez says. "It's an impossible topic to avoid, so if we are pressed, our message is not directly regarding Sept. 11, but rather, how wonderfully New Yorkers respond to adverse situations, whether it be Sept. 11, the recent blackout, you name it!"

In addition to the IOC members, NYC2012 had to appeal to representatives across the political spectrum from the state Senate to Gov. George E. Pataki to New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg. "We needed total government support," Benitez says. "They are very important allies, because the IOC needs to know that New Yorkers, whether it be the general public or civil servants, are behind the Olympics. We've been very lucky in that regard."



The representatives from these offices, while not officially members of the 2012 staff, are mouthpieces for the city's bid, in terms of the benefits a New York City Olympics can bring to the city, the state and its residents.

The fact that Doctoroff is now a member of the Bloomberg administration doesn't hurt the NYC2012 effort. In fact, according to Benitez, it makes the communication flow between NYC2012 and the mayor's office much smoother. Bloomberg's administration has proven to be a vocal supporter of Doctoroff and NYC2012's efforts. In a Dec. 28, 2001 press release announcing Doctoroff's appointment as deputy mayor, Bloomberg lauded his efforts

to bring the Games to New York, saying, "He has conceived of and led the development of the city's Olympic bid, which has generated enormous support and enthusiasm across all segments of the city. The vision of a New York Olympic Games has inspired New Yorkers about our future."

Benitez says he also needs public support for the Games. To build this support, NYC2012 has established a presence at various events around the city, including the New York City Marathon and a number of ethnic parades, setting up booths with marketing information, distributing posters and fliers and having staff members and volunteers to answer questions.

Despite all their efforts, NYC2012 does not lack foes. Among the biggest concerns are that the Games would create gridlock of unprecedented proportions. After all, say critics, a single sporting event like a New York Knicks game can create a traffic nightmare, clogging roadways from river to river.

The NYC2012 plan addresses traffic concerns with the "Olympic X" plan. The plan, which won The Municipal Art Society's Masterwork Award for Best Urban Design or Planning Concept in 2002, places all the competition venues along two intersecting water and rail axes.

The plan calls for high-speed ferryboats to deliver athletes to the venues. Special



Community leaders of Hell's Kitchen are concerned about higher traffic volume if the additional activity centers are built.

private trains would also service venues along the rail axes. The Olympic Village would be at the point where the two axes cross. Organizers claim athletes will be able to access all competition venues without traveling on public streets or highways.

In one of the most public debates generated by the Games,

for other development projects such as the revitalization of downtown.

An Internet search reveals the number of New Yorkers in favor of hosting the Games varies depending on the source. Figures range from as low as 32.6 percent, in a nonscientific Newsday poll conducted in 2002, to as high

as 84 percent in a survey conducted on behalf of NYC2012 by KRC Research and Consulting the same year. Critics note the marked contrast between the results and criticize as skewed the methodology used in polls paid for and conducted by NYC2012. But Benitez insists the majority of residents and corporations support bringing the Games to the city. NYC2012's Web site posts results of several surveys conducted by McLaughlin & Associates and Siena Research Institute on behalf of NYC2012. The most recent, November 2003, indicates 73 percent of New Yorkers favor hosting the 2012 Games. Benitez says a good example of that support came from New York's commercial pro-

duction community, which put together five videos used in the presentation to the USOC's Bid Evaluation Task Force during their final site visit in June 2002. The presentation helped New York City win the domestic nomination the following November. Directors, producers, actors and athletes volunteered time,

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residents and public advocacy groups from Manhattan's West Side — the proposed home of the new Olympic Stadium and possible future home of the New York Jets — believe the new stadium would not only block waterfront access, but that the associated traffic would ruin a neighborhood already overrun with transit exhaust. Web sites such as www.hellskitchen.net are almost entirely devoted to squashing NYC2012's efforts.

Other concerns include the cost. Despite assurances from NYC2012 that spending for the Games would come exclusively from private sources, many are worried that Olympic expenditures will deplete financial resources earmarked

equipment and skills to the project, valued at \$15 million to \$20 million. "We couldn't have afforded to pay for that ourselves," says Benitez.

Benitez says support for the Games continues to grow. "The enthusiasm keeps building; fundraising is stable, even in light of the tough economy," he says. While it's difficult to determine which numbers are real, one thing is certain, the efforts to bring the Games to New York continue running at high speed, with Benitez and his NYC2012 colleagues focusing on their personal Gold medal: the host city designation. The winner of the event will be revealed in July 2005, when the IOC announces its decision. D&S

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