

Channel 4/Paralympic Games

'Meet the Superhumans' – the campaign that shouldn't have been

Marketing Society Awards 2013

Category A – customer insight

Summary

Channel 4 has a public remit to champion alternative voices and make us see the world differently. With the Paralympics, we saw the opportunity to advance this approach.

Unlike other broadcasters we would champion the Paralympics as the equal of The Olympics. Not only that, we would schedule them as a mainstream event, seeking out huge audience figures.

However, audience research told us that viewers were uncomfortable being presented with disability, and interest in the Paralympic Games was very low. So we set about understanding exactly what was causing people to feel so negatively towards the Paralympic games.

We used innovative, longitudinal research to devise and shape a challenging strategy and compelling creative campaign in the face of much scepticism, which forced people to sit up and pay attention to Paralympic athletes, tackling prejudices head on and delivering a compelling reason to watch the Games.

And it worked. We more than achieved our viewing targets, delivered a 251% increase in viewers over the previous Paralympic Games. The vast majority of viewers agreed that Paralympic athletes were just as talented as their Olympic cousins. And we demonstrably and positively shifted public perceptions towards disability in the UK.

This paper details how research, and the audience insight it generated, was fundamental to that success.

Introduction

This is the story of the campaign that should never have been; a campaign that was battled over at every stage of the way.

Yet it's also the story of a campaign that was awarded, loved, talked about, celebrated, and effective to unprecedented levels.

This paper will show the central role research played in helping the campaign come kicking and screaming its bloody marvellous way into the world.

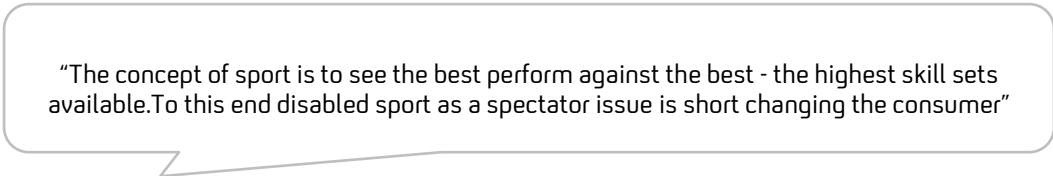
Channel 4 has always had a different take on things. Not only that, we've always wanted to inspire people to share that view with us. It's part of our DNA. Our public service remit demands that we *champion alternative voices and fresh perspectives, challenge people to see the world differently, and inspire change in people's lives*. And we don't just fulfil that remit, we fundamentally believe in it too.

That's why Channel 4 is the home the Paralympics was always meant to have. Because, for Channel 4, the Paralympics wasn't the poorer cousin of the Olympics, it was the main event. And in broadcasting it, we not only wanted to deliver unprecedented levels of viewers to it and to us, we also wanted to change the way the world saw the Paralympics and disability in general.

The only boy marching in time

In the heady days following the successful bid, Channel 4 undertook research to understand the feasibility of these ambitions. When the results came in everyone suddenly sobered up; most people were uncomfortable seeing disabled people on TV and they approached disability with awkwardness.

Just 14% of the population were positively anticipating the Paralympics and only 15% of people viewed the event as 'interesting'¹. Furthermore, 48% of the population were ambivalent or actively disinterested in the Paralympics, and 82% could not name a single Paralympic athlete, while 50% felt that disabled people would not be able to achieve what able-bodied people could, and 40% felt that disability would hold people back². These findings were supported by LOCOG's research³:



"The concept of sport is to see the best perform against the best - the highest skill sets available. To this end disabled sport as a spectator issue is short changing the consumer"

This posed a real challenge for us: we'd set ourselves an ambitious target of 35 million viewers, so it was evident we were going to have to reach beyond the usual Paralympic audience if we were going to hit this target.

Go deep and go long

Two things were clear to us in the face of such a problem. Firstly, that we had to develop a fathom-deep understanding of what was behind the public's reluctance to view. Secondly, that we had to continuously monitor how this attitude was growing or shrinking over time.

Alongside regular tracking, we commissioned Bournemouth University Media School to run a landmark in-depth longitudinal qualitative study with able-bodied and disabled individuals from a

¹ IPSOS/Channel 4 Paralympics tracking, February 2010

² Ibid

³ Source: London Paralympic Report/Nielsen

cross section of British society. Crucially, this study took place over a two year period, with a central group of respondents. This timeframe gave us a clear window to monitor change and by following the same group of people, we could clearly extract how their views were changing.

This study helped us unpick the issues that lay behind the reluctance to view. Some were understandable. Some were disappointing. All ran deep:

1. People were uncomfortable talking about disability, constantly in fear of saying the wrong thing.
2. Looking at disabled people often made them feel a little sad, and so they avoided doing so.
3. People admired Paralympians – they had triumphed against adversity – but they just couldn't see them as athletes and the Paralympics didn't seem like a sport.
4. The public was wholly focused on the Olympics. The Paralympics wasn't registering.

The solution and the role of marketing present themselves

As much as research highlighted the deep-rooted issues we were facing, they also presented us with a way of overcoming them.

Research showed there was a 'need for the media to balance the human side of the coverage with treating the Paralympians as athletes first and foremost'. And the more we thought about this insight, the more we believed that this was a solution to all the problems.

Into concept research

4Creative, Channel 4's in-house creative department, developed ideas and we headed into developmental research with three potential ways of doing it:

1. **Let the general public get to know the Paralympians as people**
Short form documentaries focusing on individual members of Team GB reinforced their incredible stories.
2. **Reposition their disability as a positive, not a negative**
A big CGI heavy trail was developed set in a futuristic laboratory where athletes are fused with technology to form a band of x-men like superheroes.
3. **Reposition them and the Games as the equal of the Olympics**
A concept was developed that was encapsulated in a message to the Olympics – 'Thanks for the warm up'.

And/both, not either/or

Eschewing the belief that the role of the research was to uncover a preferred route, we found that the three concepts were actually different layers to the same idea.

The short form content gave the lighter and non-sports fans a hook to tighten engagement and encourage them to tune in.

'Thanks for the warm up' fitted with Channel 4's irreverent reputation but also made it quite clear that the Paralympics should be seen as a thrilling event in its own right.

And the 'X-men' concept delivered on the sort of scale and excitement that would prevent The Paralympics from getting lost in all the Olympic noise.

The logic was perfect. The respondents agreed. There was just one problem. Our approach also made them feel awkward.

We carry on marching in time, everyone else makes to go in a different direction

It might be in our DNA to challenge people to see the world differently, but not everyone else is made that way. We were taking an in-depth and in-your-face approach and people didn't like it. If they felt uncomfortable before the groups, they left them feeling even more so. But we'd also got

something wrong ourselves. Our superhero approach rather than blowing prejudices apart, was reinforcing them. If you saw disabled people as 'other' as somehow not quite human – here was an idea to prove that you were right.

When research uncovers such antagonism, there's always a temptation for the researcher to ward their clients off, and the approach that everyone believed in is strangled at birth. But Kindling did the opposite. They told us to keep going. They argued the approaches were provoking a heated reaction, but a heated reaction is exactly what we needed if we wanted to achieve our ambitions. Equally, whilst our current superhero approach was delivering the opposite of what we wanted, the *idea* that disabled athletes embodied super-heroic qualities had the potential to be right.

We take stock, we stumble, but people start marching to our tune

The trail at the centre of the campaign was repurposed following research agency Kindling's feedback, with a greater emphasis being placed on the 'human' part of 'superhuman'.

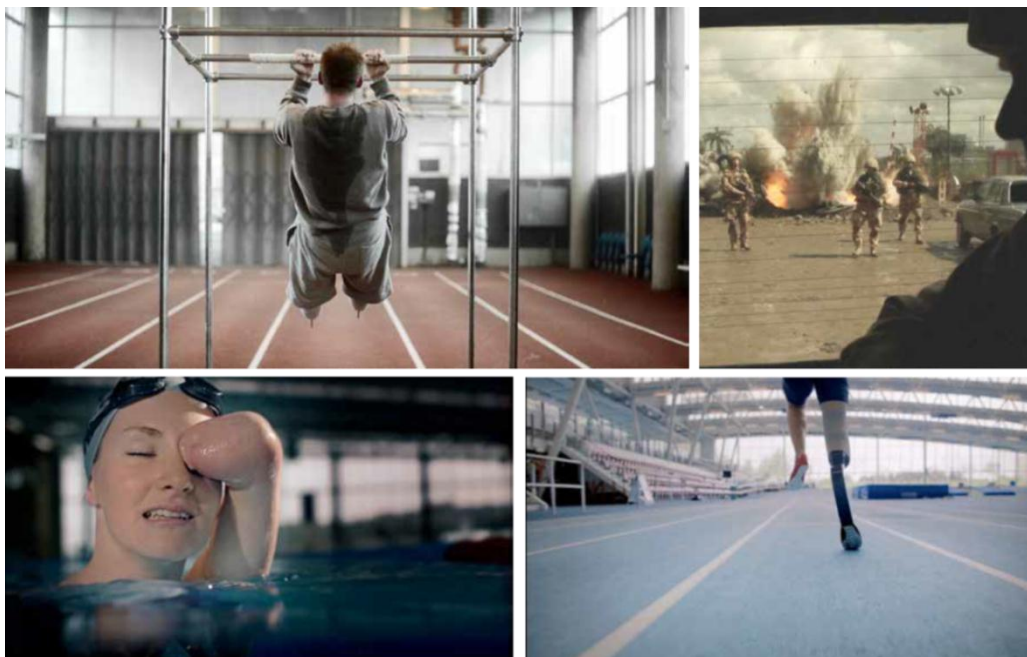
We returned to research. Again we were met with heated reactions. While we'd eradicated the overt notions of 'otherness' present in its previous iteration, we were still confronting people with what they were more comfortable turning away from.

Not only that, we'd introduced an arresting meditation of the roots of the athletes' disabilities in the middle of the execution. In the midst of all the triumph, there was tragedy. And people don't like tragedy in adverts. But what that middle section gave respondents was an understanding, a relatable way into their lives. It was uncomfortable, but essential. The research told us to keep on going.

And when we tested the final film, shot through with all the humanity, scale and attitude that made 'Superhuman' such a cultural event, the research counsel was proved correct. It was perceived as completely redefining the Paralympics and elevating it to the same level as the Olympic Games. The reaction from the disabled groups was even more positive finding it not only relevant but inspiring.

Superhumans goes large

What had become clear throughout the research was the importance of scale, and we began to understand that it was no good having an execution that felt big, if we planned our media in a small way. We needed to give the Paralympics a proper, big brand launch.



The 'Superhumans' campaign became the biggest in Channel 4's history, first appearing when The Olympics was on in an order to give it equal standing. The trail was given a big brand premiere, with a simultaneous 'roadblock' at 9pm across 78 channels. It even appeared on the BBC; the first time a non-BBC promotion has done so.

And a poster execution we developed thanking The Olympics for the warm-up was amplified in everything from twitter hashtags to a banner hung above the Olympic stadium.



Results

The campaign and the coverage it promoted both exceeded their objectives by a considerable distance.

The campaign was seen:

- 86% of the UK population had seen the on-air marketing campaign⁴.

The campaign was talked about:

- On the night it broke, it generated over 5,000 tweets.

It made an impact on popular culture:

- David Cameron said: "The Superhumans campaign...really makes people think", and Boris Johnson claimed "it set exactly the right tone ...and created an enormous amount of appetite in the country"
- It even helped Public Enemy's killer track 'Harder Than You Think' become a top 5 hit – the band's highest UK chart position

The campaign was lauded within the communications industry as the year's best:

- It has won multiple industry awards, including Campaign's campaign of the year

The campaign had a dramatic effect:

Awareness of The Paralympics was raised⁵

- Unprompted awareness shot through the roof, from 16% at the end of July 2012 to a huge 77% just before the Games started
- Following the Games, 41% people could name a Paralympian (up from 18%)

It brought new viewers to The Paralympics:

- 69% of people said that 2012 was the first time they'd made an effort to watch

It attracted all-important high-value audiences:

- During The Games, the channel's share of ABC1 and 16-34 year olds audiences was up 111% and 24% respectively

⁴ Channel 4 Audience Technology & Insight department, September 2012

⁵ IPSOS/Channel 4 Paralympics tracking

As a result, our each target wasn't just met, it was smashed:

We had aimed for our coverage to reach 35m but we exceeded that, eventually reaching 39.9m - A 251% increase in the Beijing Paralympics⁶.

And Channel 4 achieved incredible share

- Channel 4 share over the Paralympics was 12% - almost double the channel average. During The Opening Ceremony share peaked at 45% and was Channel 4's highest audience since September 2005.

Reframing the disability conversation

Alongside the final findings from the Bournemouth University study, we commissioned a nationally-representative quantitative survey among 1000 respondents in the week after the Paralympic Games to understand just how much attitudes towards disability had been reframed⁷.

Respondents were shocked about how much they'd connected with the games

- Participants struggled 'to find words strong enough to express their sense of wonder at the achievements witnessed on their screens'.

There was also a clear shift amongst audiences from focussing on athletes' disabilities to sporting excellence in the Games.

- 91% of viewers thought Paralympians were just as talented as Olympians

Able-bodied people felt more comfortable talking about disability

- Almost 75% of young viewers aged 12-16 felt more comfortable talking about disabilities

The result was that able-bodied people began to feel more positively about disabled people

- 83% of viewers agreed that the Paralympics would improve society's perceptions of disability
- 2 in 3 viewers felt more positive towards disabled viewers after watching Channel 4's coverage

Disabled participants also acknowledged a shift in attitudes towards them from others:

- 'There was like a two week period when it was very positive to be disabled. Suddenly [people] realised it's not a scary thing to talk to me'.

Channel 4 won the Rio Paralympics

We were granted the UK television rights to the Rio 2016 Paralympics and the Sochi Winter Paralympics in 2014

Conclusion

In an alternative universe, where they don't value research and audience insight so dearly, there is a version of a Paralympics of respectable viewing figures and of prejudices questioned but never challenged. For all the awards 'Meet the Superhumans' has won, it's important to remember, that without research, it would never have been here in the first place.

⁶ BARB, September 2012

⁷ BDRC Continental, September 2012