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Los Angeles, 1984: Hot Dogs and Croissants

Abstract

Providing spectator food service for the Summer Olympic Games in Los Angeles was a massive and challenging undertaking. The author details the planning, recruitment, training, and sales considerations which the provider went through over a two-year period to be ready for the Games.

Keywords

Vince J. Pantuso, Los Angeles, 1984: Hot Dogs and Croissants, Cost projections, Revenue estimates, Olympics, Logistics, Control systems

Los Angeles, 1984: Hot Dogs and Croissants

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Providing spectator food service for the Summer Olympic Games in Los Angeles was a massive and challenging undertaking. The author details the planning, recruitment, training, and sales considerations which the provider went through over a two-year period to be ready for the Games.

The Summer Olympic Games held in Los Angeles were not only a source of pride and excitement to American sports fans, but also a unique challenge for several companies who provided the food and beverage services during the Games.

The challenges were different because a variety of athletic competitions were held at several venues spread throughout the greater Los Angeles area; those events were projected to attract up to 7 million live spectators in the 16-day period from July 28 to August 12. Although some food service organizations have served 100,000 or more people for a major football game or race on a given day, very few, if any, have served crowds between 100,000 and 200,000 per day for two weeks straight at one venue.

The Volume Services Division of Interstate United Corporation provided the spectator food service at the Los Angeles Coliseum and Sports Arena during the 23rd Olympiad. The opening and closing ceremonies, boxing, and track and field (athletics) competitions were held at the Coliseum complex, often with both morning and evening sessions on the same day.

What was involved in the planning, execution, and control process to insure that the customers, (the Olympics spectators), the clients (the Los Angeles Olympic Organizing Committee (LAOCC) and the Los Angeles Coliseum Commission), and the parent company (Hanson Trust, Ltd.) were all served well?

Planning Began Two Years in Advance

The initial planning process began over two years before with a particular emphasis on the adequacy of the food service facilities at the Coliseum and Sports Arena to accommodate the expected large attendances. Since the Coliseum was built in 1923, many of the facilities were both insufficient in number and inadequately equipped. Volume Services had obtained a 15-year food service contract there in 1977 and had invested nearly \$2 million in leasehold improvements and

equipment for the concession stands and commissaries, but that investment was now over five years old and needed to be upgraded and supplemented.

To accomplish this, Volume Services entered a three-party agreement with the LAOOC and the Coliseum Commission, whereby the company provided funding for \$1,650,000 in food service facilities and equipment which would be repaid, in large part, from the food service rental income derived at the Olympic Games and other future events held at the Coliseum. This investment essentially provided the company with a 50 percent increase in points of services (to 378) by the addition of 17 new concession stands and the expansion of the service capacity in the existing 54 stands. Also, two new storage and commissary facilities were built. All retail facilities were re-equipped and given a new graphics and decor package consistent with the "Festive Federalism" theme of the Games. The negotiations for these improvements were finalized in December 1983.

Obviously, a condition precedent to the facilities improvement project was to determine projected attendance and revenue levels, hours of operation, menu and supply logistics, staffing and training requirements, and desired control systems. An examination of each aspect of the project would provide a comparison with other on-going operations and insight into one aspect of the tremendous effort behind hosting an event of this magnitude.

The projected levels of attendance at each event were of critical importance because of their keystone effect in determining revenue, staffing, and food production levels. The Volume Services Olympic Task Force met with members of the LAOOC's Spectator Services Department directed by John Liesner over a year ago to establish maximum and minimum ranges of attendance for each day at each event at each venue (Coliseum and/or Sports Arena).

Revenue Levels Were Established

Given those ranges of attendance, the company was able to establish revenue (sales) levels using estimates of per capita expenditures based on past spending patterns at similar events in the Coliseum complex (professional and collegiate football games and professional boxing matches), adjusted for variables such as menu selection, pricing, length of spectator stay, morning vs. afternoon session, indoor vs. outdoor events, etc. Very little usable sales information from previous Olympic Games was available and, even if it were, it would have been of questionable value because of the time lapse, the differences in spending patterns (as much as 70 percent of the spectators in Los Angeles were American residents), and the required commercial viability of the 1984 Summer Olympic Games (no significant governmental funding was involved).

After the tickets officially went on sale in June 1983, monthly revisions of sales by event were provided to the company, enabling the continual refinement of projects. For the 16-day period of the Games, revenues of over \$7 million were set for spectator food and beverages sales and the Coliseum and Sports Arena, excluding revenue from

novelties, off-premises food vendors, or the value of meals for athletes, coaches, and employees.

Prepared with an event-by-event estimate of revenues and an official time schedule (hours of operation), the company began to develop staffing and training requirements. First, an Olympic coordinator, Matthew Brodsky, was hired to focus his efforts solely on the Olympics and serve as liaison between the existing management team in Los Angeles and the LAOOC and the Coliseum Commission. The next step in the staffing process was to hire a personnel coordinator, Molly Dahm, a Florida International University graduate, to recruit, schedule and train the approximately 2,500 - 3,000 employees required. Both individuals worked very closely with the LAOOC Spectator Services Department to meet or exceed the standards and objectives of the LAOOC, Coliseum Commission, various governmental agencies, and Volume Services.

An Additional 2,500 Employees Were Needed

An additional 2,500 qualified food service employees were needed to supplement the existing 500 Coliseum employees. Obviously, Los Angeles hotels and other Olympic venues were all competing for employees. Recruitment efforts were focused on the following sources:

- **Volume Services.** Present and former employees at the Coliseum were contacted.
- **LAOOC staffing centers.** Efforts were coordinated with those of the four Olympic staffing centers located throughout Los Angeles who were developing an applicant pool for paid and volunteer positions.
- **Los Angeles Employee Development Department (EDD).** 1,500 interviews of pre-screened applicants were conducted during the last week of March.
- **Volunteer groups.** About 25 percent of staffing needs were filled by various clubs and charitable organizations which provided volunteer labor in exchange for a percentage of sales generated which was donated to their treasuries.
- **Campus recruiting program.** Campaigns were developed for about 40 colleges and universities in the Los Angeles area.

Once a sufficient number of employees (including a “breakage factor” for no-shows or security risks) was recruited, the crucial process of training each in his or her respective job began; an overview of LAOOC and Volume Services standards was provided. The essence of the training plan included:

- Development of written job descriptions and task breakdowns for each position.
- Assignment and training of lead positions (supervisors, stand managers, etc.), accomplished in May.
- Skills training sessions (16) for all employees at training centers near the Coliseum the first two weeks of June.
- On-the-job training at L.A. Express (USFL) games in the spring and at the U.S. Olympic Track and Field Trials June 14-24 at the

Coliseum and Sports Arena.

- More intensive training and completion of certification examinations in food service operations, sanitation, and company policies and procedures for all supervisors and stand managers.

Varied Menus Were Developed

Simultaneously with the massive personnel effort, the Volume Services Olympics Management Team was developing menus and supply logistics. In addition to the traditional stadium and arena concession fare, the Summer Olympics Games spectator menus featured many breakfast and brunch items for the morning sessions. Selections included fresh Danish pastries and croissants, various fruit juices, bagels and cream cheese, fresh fruit platters, and yogurts.

For the afternoon and evening sessions, the fans enjoyed a variety of sandwiches on croissant rolls and pocket pita bread, freshly made salad platters, fruit and cheese platters, giant cookies, frozen natural fruit bars, and the all-American hero sandwich. Obviously, the menu was designed to recognize the varying tastes of the spectators, many of whom spent their entire day at the venue.

Another important consideration for the menu design was to maintain the same level of retail prices for the Olympics as had been in effect earlier in the year as part of an effort to be a good host. With the help of suppliers, this was accomplished, while cost of sales was still maintained in the 25-30 percent range.

Suppliers displayed a great deal of cooperation and dedication to help serve the Olympics. The logistics of supplying an operation functioning on a 24-hour-per-day basis with restricted delivery times (at night) and rigid security clearance procedures were mind-boggling. Even with new warehouse and distribution buildings, there was not enough physical storage space available in the Coliseum and Sports Arena, so Volume Services had more than 60 trailers, each of which was 40 feet long, on the grounds to provide the necessary support storage capacity.

In distribution, there are some rather large numbers to describe the scope of activity. Volume Services purchased, stored, distributed, and sold over 1.1 million cups of beer, over 1.5 million cups of soft drinks, 1.2 million hot dogs, and 500,000 bags of peanuts, among other items. In addition, 3 million pounds of ice were used.

Control Systems Are Crucial

Numbers may seem important, but having the proper control systems was critical to the success of this effort. The complexity and short time span of the event schedule, coupled with the security requirements and the magnitude of the sales, mandated strict control systems to insure the integrity and accountability of the operation. Aided by a headquarters staff, a full complement of auditors, accountants, clerks, and security personnel were employed on-site throughout the Games. Standard Volume Services forms and systems for inventory and cash control, sales reporting, and payroll were used with little or no modifications. Perhaps the most significant difference

associated with the Games was that all employees and suppliers had to have security accreditation of various degrees depending on which high security areas the employee was entering.

The Summer Olympic Games were indeed a unique challenge for Volume Services and everyone else associated with this event. Thousands of food service professionals worked diligently to put their "best food forward" to the many visitors from throughout the nation and world. The entire Summer Olympic Games became a gold medal event for all Americans.