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Róisín Upton, Team Ireland Hockey International, at the announcement of Circle K's 'Here for Ireland' initiative. Harry Murphy /SPORTSFILE

Campaign

Circle K 'Here for Ireland' PR Campaign

Description of Campaign

In 2021, Circle K utilised its sponsorships of the Olympic Federation of Ireland (OFI) and Paralympics Ireland (PI) to create a clear and innovative communications campaign that deepened its connection with the public and firmly established Circle K as a brand that is at the heart of Irish communities.



Public Relations Consultant

Teneo Ireland



Client

Circle K

Background to the Campaign

When Topaz rebranded to Circle K in 2018, it faced a challenge in that it was replacing a brand that had been popular in Ireland with a loyal customer base. That popularity was based on the positive impact which Topaz had on communities, through programmes such as its 'Cash for Clubs' initiative.

For Circle K to grow into a similarly well-liked and trusted brand, it needed to meaningfully connect with communities and establish its Irish credentials. Sponsorship was identified as the most powerful way to do this.

After supporting Circle K in identifying different sponsorship opportunities, in late 2019, the retailer became the first brand partner to both the Olympic Federation of Ireland (OFI) and Paralympics Ireland (PI) ahead of the Tokyo 2020 Games. The OFI and PI were chosen as Team Ireland's journey to Tokyo began in the communities that the athletes were from.

To activate the sponsorship, Circle K created 'Here for Ireland', a brand new, innovative customer generated digital currency for Team Ireland athletes. Any time that a member of Circle K's loyalty programme scanned their loyalty

card in store, they generated digital coins that athletes could use as real currency to buy Circle K goods or services. After year one of 'Here for Ireland', over €84,500 of digital coins had been generated for 148 Team Ireland athletes. However, when the Tokyo Games was postponed to 2021 and the sacrifices the athletes would have to make to compete in Tokyo became greater, there was an opportunity for Circle K to leverage the sponsorship even further to position the brand as being at the heart of communities across Ireland.

To do this, Circle K needed to create a point of differentiation for the brand amongst a competitive sponsorship landscape for the Tokyo 2020 Games. PR, rather than above the line advertising, was identified as the primary channel to do this, as it could effectively increase interest in the stories of Team Ireland athletes. In doing so, Circle K would capture the hearts and minds of the public, while raising thousands for Team Ireland athletes.

Statement of Objectives

In 2021, the second year of Circle K's sponsorship of the OFI and PI ahead of the Tokyo 2020 Games, the key objectives were as follows:

- **Awareness:** Drive awareness of Circle K's OFI and PI sponsorship with consumers by delivering a PR campaign that generates a consumer reach of 2 million.
- **Positioning:** Forge a connection between the Circle K brand and the customer through developing a best-in-class loyalty app for 'Here for Ireland'.
- **Understanding:** Increase the public's awareness of Team Ireland athletes and their journeys to Tokyo by featuring key messaging of the athlete's stories in 90% of media coverage.
- **Engagement:** Drive an increase in consumer engagement on Circle K's social media channels and website, generating 650k organic social media impressions and 1.2 million paid social media impressions.
- **Impact:** Deliver an impactful PR campaign for Circle K's OFI and PI sponsorship in 2021 that would achieve 30 articles for media coverage, capture the attention of media and the public, clearly communicating key messages about the 'Here for Ireland' in-store initiative and increase brand coverage using branded photocall imagery.
- **Authenticity:** Demonstrate how Circle K is being authentic in its sponsorship of the OFI and PI, and really assisting athletes on their journey to Tokyo in a tangible way that customers could engage with.
- **Differentiate:** Create a campaign with a point of differentiation that ensures Circle K stood out amongst other OFI and PI sponsors and could speak directly to communities nationwide.

Programme Planning and Strategy

Circle K identified the key audience for the campaign as families across Ireland. Sport fans who live close in proximity to where members of Team Ireland come from.

The primary challenge Circle K faced going into 2021 was encouraging the target audience to visit their local store just to support Team Ireland athletes, as many had little awareness about them. Research carried out by Circle K in 2020 also revealed that a lot of people didn't know which Team Ireland athletes came from their own communities.

To understand how PR could answer this challenge, Teneo conducted focus groups which identified that although the key audience wanted Team Ireland to perform well during the Tokyo 2020 Games, they didn't feel connected to the athletes themselves or the sacrifices they had to make to compete at Tokyo.

This insight enabled us to develop a communications strategy that would engage the key audience and increase their understanding about Team Ireland, by bringing the stories of Team Ireland athletes, information on what communities they came from, and the sacrifices they had to make to compete on the world's biggest sporting stage into public consciousness. In doing so, the key audience would understand more about Team Ireland and become more excited about supporting them at the Tokyo 2020 Games.

To tell these stories effectively, Teneo needed to grab the attention of media in a competitive sponsorship landscape. Considered campaign planning would be required to do this, as well as evolved messaging that would not only chronicle the athletes' journeys, but clearly demonstrate how supporting them in 2021 was more important than ever. The communications campaign needed to demonstrate how Circle K had a presence in every community nationwide

making it easier for the key audience than any other sponsor to support their community champions. Here's how we addressed the challenges to achieve our objectives.

Ambassadors

Working with the OFI and PI gave Teneo the opportunity to collaborate with members of Team Ireland that would appeal to sports fans. However, it was very important that Circle K partnered with ambassadors that could deliver maximum reach and impact, appealing to a broader pool of journalists than just sport.

Swimmer Shane Ryan, hockey player Roisin Upton, Taekwondo athlete Jack Woolley, para cyclist Richael Timothy, high jump competitor Jordan Lee, and long-distance runner Greta Streimikyte were selected to support the campaign at crucial intervals. All six athletes had unique stories to tell and appealed broadly to media, and the key audience.

Media and In-Store Activations

To truly demonstrate how Circle K was making it easier than ever for the public to support Team Ireland athletes, several initiatives were created that generated a news angle for the ongoing 'Here for Ireland' campaign as well as strong media coverage potential.

Keep It Lit

Teneo firstly sought to capitalise on a major moment in the lead up to the Tokyo 2020 Games, the Olympic Torch relay, to invigorate key audience interest in generating digital coins for the athletes. Circle K created its own initiative called 'Keep It Lit' as the torch relay took place, and for a limited time only, each time customers scanned their loyalty tag instore, the number of digital coins they generated for athletes doubled. Shane Ryan participated in a creative photography shoot and in carefully chosen media interviews to promote 'Keep It Lit', and media coverage which all featured key messages about the initiative appeared in titles such as the Irish Independent, Irish Times and online on Independent.ie.

Naming Competition for Official In-Store OFI Merchandise

In collaboration with the OFI, Circle K produced a range of exclusive merchandise that was sold in all Circle K stores, excluding Circle K Express. The merchandise was produced as another means for people to support the 'Here for Ireland' digital coins initiative, and a new competition was launched to encourage the key audience to engage with the brand online and suggest the name of two soft toys that were part of the in-store merchandise.

Jack Woolley participated in a photography shoot and in more targeted interviews to promote the initiative. In interviews, he told the story of his journey, and key campaign messages not only drove awareness of the merchandise but encouraged customers to generate 'Here for Ireland' digital coins in store too. The PR activity generated 17,000 competition entries, and the winner was announced on the Late Late Show.

To Team Ireland

Circle K created another initiative that gave the public the opportunity to show their support by submitting a postcard that included a picture or message of support for Team Ireland, and to drop it into post boxes that were in every Circle K store. The initiative gave families in communities across the country the opportunity to demonstrate their support in an easy way. The postcards travelled to Tokyo with Team Ireland and were displayed in the athlete village, reminding them of the support they had from the public, who were watching them compete from home as crowds were not allowed spectate any event due to Covid-19. A selection of winning postcards was chosen to feature in the stings of Circle K's sponsorship of RTÉ's Olympic Games coverage and were animated for same. Team Ireland hockey player Roisin Upton and high jump para-athlete Jordan Lee promoted the initiative and told their stories to media. Media coverage featuring either Roisin or Jordan appeared in every national print title, including The Irish Daily Star, the Irish Sun and the Irish Independent.

The timings of each initiative were strategically spaced out to ensure we maintained momentum for our campaign in the lead up to Tokyo 2020 Games and maximise every media coverage opportunity.

Online/Digital Content

In addition to photography and media interviews, the campaign's six ambassadors collaborated with Teneo on the production of engaging digital content for Circle K's social media channels. Aligning to content from the media interviews, the athlete's digital content chronicled a day in the 'life' (training regimes) of the athletes. The 'Here for Ireland' campaign ran throughout the Tokyo 2020 Games, and to maintain public interest in watching the games

and supporting their local athletes, Teneo created bespoke digital content for Circle K that communicated the daily schedules of the competition as well as cheat sheets for different sports so that the key audience could learn and show off their newly acquired knowledge to friends and family.

Paralympics In-Store Activation

In the weeks before the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games were scheduled to begin, Teneo collaborated with para cyclist Richael Timothy to help drive a final push for communities to generate digital coins before the Team Ireland para-athletes embarked for Tokyo. Richael had a remarkable journey to Tokyo, which secured plenty of media interest and a strong opportunity to communicate campaign messages again. The activity with Richael also raised awareness of an in-store fundraising initiative Circle K ran the week before the Tokyo 2020 Games, where €1 from the sale of every Circle K reusable coffee cup was donated to Paralympics Ireland, and customers also had the chance to donate their 10c discount when using reusable cups to Paralympics Ireland. Richael participated in a photo shoot and media interviews online before she flew to Tokyo to compete in the 2020 Paralympic Games.

Measurement

The 'Here for Ireland' campaign surpassed all KPI's and campaign objectives:

- **Awareness:** Group M conducted two waves of a research study, the first wave pre-Tokyo 2020 and the second wave after the games were completed.
- 1,007 adults were surveyed, revealing that after the Tokyo 2020 Games, Circle K generated the highest brand recall for Olympic sponsorship **(58%) – the target was 40%**.
- **26%** felt Circle K had the greatest brand impact, **18%** more than any other sponsor. **56%** of Irish adults also saw Circle K's RTE TV sponsorship stings at least once.
- **Positioning and understanding:** The Group M Wave 2 research study revealed a higher proportion of the public agreed with these statements compared to Wave 1:
 - > Circle K supports Irish athletes **(61% in Wave 2 vs 46% in Wave 1)**.
 - > Circle K is part of local communities **(68% in Wave 2 vs 67% in Wave 1)**.
 - > Circle K is contributing towards bringing people together through sport **(61% in Wave 2 vs 48% in Wave 1)**.
- Circle K's Here for Ireland app won 2021 Loyalty program of the Year.
- **Engagement:** **4.8 million** online impressions **(the target was 2 million)**, **850k** organic social media impressions **(the target was 650k)**, **1.45m** paid social media impressions **(the target was 1.2m)**.
- The soft toy naming competition received **25,400 clicks to site (the target was 8,000)** with **17,000 votes**.
- **Impact:** **92** articles of press coverage **(the target was 40)**, reach of **13.3m (the target 5m)**.
- **Authenticity and differentiation:** **172** Team Ireland athletes signed up to *Here for Ireland*.

Throughout the campaign, Team Ireland athletes commented on how important it was to them to have a brand partner in Circle K that truly recognised and supported them. A carefully planned, targeted, and executed campaign delivered for all stakeholders, supporting athletes on their journey to Tokyo, growing brand awareness and affinity, and connecting the Circle K brand with Irish customers. Despite the challenges of Covid-19, the campaign delivered a phenomenal business result and post-campaign research revealed that **68%** of the public felt that Circle K was positively impacting communities.

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