

The NSK in the PR Jungle

by Chris Gould
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Although the words 'Japan' and 'sound public relations' are rarely used in the same sentence, the Japan Sumo Association has launched a concerted PR initiative to boost the flagging popularity of a time honoured tradition.

Queues snaked alongside the Kokugikan and along the Ryogoku sidewalks on a hot and humid April morning. The white shirts and black ties of sararimen mingled, but rarely jostled, with the immaculate blouses of well-dressed older women and the gleaming t-shirts of curious young gaijin. Amazingly, the time was 7am. Unusually, entry to the Kokugikan was free. The all-stable practice before the Yokozuna Deliberation Council (YDC) had drawn just the crowd that the Japan Sumo Association (NSK) craved.

Back in the day, such practices were solely intended to make the job of the YDC easier, presenting them with three invaluable opportunities a year to assess the performance of yokozuna candidates while they faced both each other and the makuuchi rank-and-file. However, in a period when 'Kokugikan' has become synonymous with 'empty seats,' the NSK has grudgingly had to re-examine the principal function of its every activity. For the grim-faced men in NSK suits, sumo is no longer exclusively about pride in one's heritage, but about sales. Thus has the souken come to be prostituted as never before, heavily advertised in print and online as a one-off chance to witness the stars of sumo from reasonably close range in the Kokugikan. It is but the latest in a



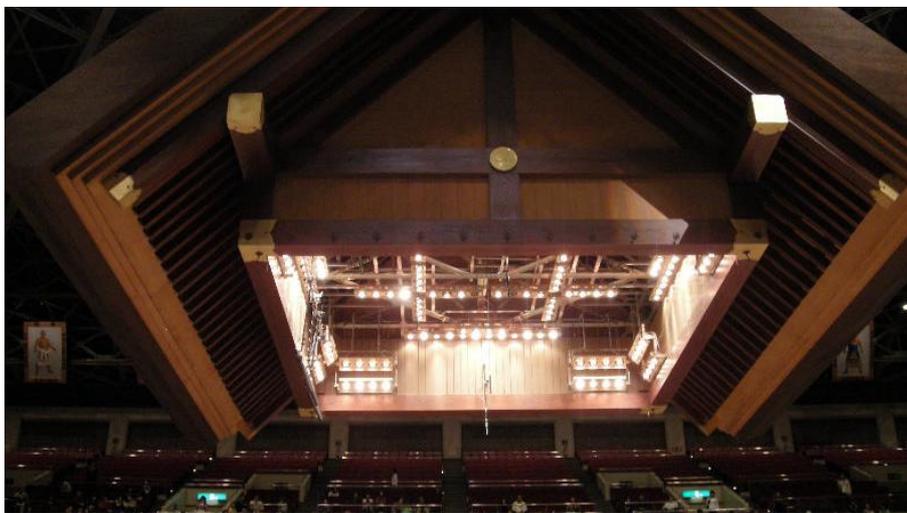
series of PR initiatives designed to win back the wavering fans and shore up the next generation of sumo support.

Isegahama ignites

Although the NSK has grappled with falls in ticket sales for over a decade, only in the summer of 2004 did it begin to seriously debate the merits of modern PR. That debate was triggered by the former Isegahama oyakata, a man who – ironically but understandably – had become far less concerned about his own public image after the death of his

family in the infamous JAL 123 plane crash of 1985. In a detailed interview with a tabloid newspaper, the ex-Isegahama suggested that the NSK was anguishing over empty Kokugikan seats in private, and had consequently asked him to devise a new marketing plan. Alas (but predictably given the NSK's disdain for oyakata who pour out their thoughts to the gutter press), Isegahama's interview prevented him from finishing the draft of the plan. He was relieved of his popularity-enhancing duties nigh-immediately as punishment.





Food for thought

In its bid to refill the Kokugikan, one of the first things the NSK examined was food. More precisely: what sort of food would interest the fans? The NSK concluded, in 2005, that it was time to open a western-style fast-food bar on the Kokugikan's second floor, to ensure that younger Japanese and the growing armies of foreign visitors could be furnished with enough hamburgers, chicken nuggets and fries. To appease the die-hards and entice waverers merely curious in all things Japanese, the NSK also converted the Kokugikan's Sumo School into a temporary chanko kitchen, serving sumo's staple food at an affordable price of 200 yen-per-bowl. In 2008, though, the 'chanko bar' was somewhat sheepishly transferred to a less glamorous

'chanko tent' after the Sumo School fell foul of Health and Safety regulations.

Reaching for overseas

The mid-2000s also saw the NSK rethink its overseas jungyo (practice tour) strategy. Whereas beforehand, an Olympic Games approach had been adopted, with jungyo gracing countries on a rotational basis, post-2004, jungyo would be targeted at a specific market: America. The strategy proved to be increasingly risky after the quickfire retirements of sumo's key 'American' assets, Yokozuna Musashimaru and juryo-journeyman Sentoryu, in 2003. Nevertheless, the NSK pressed ahead, promoting Grand Sumo Las Vegas in October, 2005, the Hawaiian Jungyo in June, 2007, and Grand Sumo Los Angeles in June, 2008. Although



far from every seat was sold, enough interest was shown for the NSK to make another bold venture into the English speaking market, and plan a return to England for the first time in 18 years for October, 2009. What remains to be seen, however, is how the NSK's PR machine will cope with the anticipated departure of English-speaking Musashimaru Oyakata in late-2008 and the retirement of English-speaking Azumazeki Oyakata in May, 2009.

With the increased apathy to jungyo in Japan showing no immediate signs of abating, the importance of overseas jungyo has become paramount. So paramount, in fact, that the NSK has effectively devolved some overseas promotional tasks to individual heya, such as Tamanoi and Sadogatake, with the latter making a well-received trip to Israel in early 2007. Whether sampling the stars of one heya or several, it is clearly hoped that those who witness sumo for the first time on their own shores will one day join the ranks of second-tier gaijin Kokugikan dwellers should they find themselves in Japan.

Exit Takasago, enter Kokonoe

In February, 2008, overall responsibility for the NSK's PR efforts was transferred from the embattled Takasago oyakata to the more Teflon-like Kokonoe oyakata. The replacement of an overweight, sideburned ex-ozeki with a photogenic, muscle-bound hunk of a former yokozuna ensured that the face of NSK public relations thus received a positive makeover. Within no time, Kokonoe's smiley face was pasted onto Kokugikan posters and sandwiched by the 'genki' visages of professional-looking younger women, in order to advertise the NSK's 'lucky draw' exercise, which sees fans answer sumo questionnaires, slip them into Kokugikan boxes, and enter a random draw for the chance to

win two free tickets to the following tournament. The new posters are markedly more gender-neutral and welcoming than many of their predecessors, which contained pictures of the hefty Takasago straining a smile and punching the air unconvincingly. Interestingly, one of Kokonoe's first acts as Communications Chief was to replace the clear glass window of his office door with smoked glass. At first glance, such an act seems an horrendous faux pas, ironically converting an office responsible for opening sumo's doors into a bunker. Deeper down, though, the act subtly increases the professionalism of the PR office. Ultimately, it did not do to have the Head of PR's desk being directly visible to the public through the flimsiest of door-windows – as was the case under Takasago. How many professional organisations expose their PR heads in the same way? Besides the design of office doors, a highly pressing task for the NSK's new head is to take active involvement in the reform of PR for the November basho in Fukuoka. Much disquiet has been voiced about the lack of a concerted advertising campaign in Fukuoka, and the resultant collapse in ticket sales for a number of years.

In May, 2008, Kokonoe effectively made a bold plea for older fans to return by introducing the 'Meet 'n' Greet your Heroes' initiative.



Aware that he himself had fought in sumo's 1970s/ 80s heyday, Kokonoe called upon his former opponents or stablemates to present themselves in the main entrance hall just after lunchtime on each day of the May tournament. Former greats such as Hokutoumi, Asahifuji, Terao, Kirinji and Takamiyama duly obliged. Fans, having raced to obtain one of perhaps 100 free tickets, formed orderly queues, shook the pastmaster's hand and received free handprints. Alas, the usefulness of the exercise in encouraging fans to return was fatally compromised by the fact that it was not advertised outside of the Kokugikan! Instead of saying to potential customers: 'buy a matchday ticket and meet your former hero for free,' it merely spoke to fans who had already come to the arena! A better form of the initiative might include the tagline: 'Meet your former heroes

in (e.g. Ueno Park) AND buy discounted tickets for the next basho.'

The April 2008 souken

Seemingly the central plank of the NSK's PR campaign this spring was the all-stables practice before the Yokozuna Deliberation Council on Tuesday April 29th. Never before had such a souken been so ardently advertised to the general public, and a crowd of several thousand was attracted – in the end, we understand from NSK sources, 6,000 strong. Attendance at the souken was officially subject to compliance with strict behavioural conditions, the most important of which was: 'no shouting for your favourite sumotori.' For many, the expectation of several thousand people watching their heroes in complete silence for two hours might appear a little optimistic. For the NSK, as is often the case, the rule pertaining to such an expectation proved impossible to enforce. Many Japanese fans simply failed to read their behavioural instruction sheets. Many gaijin could not have read them even had they wished to. And hardly anybody present could have imagined sitting in the matchday arena without wildly acknowledging the legendary crowd-pleaser Takamisakari.

The event predictably began with a mad rush for desirable seats, in line with the unwritten Japanese





maxim that 'last-in-line can still legitimately become first-served so long as they dodge and weave to the front quickly enough.' Upon entering the arena, the winners and losers of the masu-seki rush were confronted with an army of black-belted makushita men standing atop and around the dohyo, conducting a multi-stable winner-stays-on series of practice bouts (moshiai geiko). Highly desirable seats in the house were rightly reserved for the YDC members, whose lethargic frames occupied chairs behind a table which lay a tentative salt-throw from the dohyo. The centre of that table was occupied by a non-YDC member, NSK Chairman Kitanoumi Toshimitsu, his dark-suit buttressing an air of sombreness fully-apparent in his crumpled face. To his right lay the distinctive permed hairstyle of Makiko Uchidate, the first ever female member of the YDC, fervently testing her pen nib prior to the copious notes that she doubtless wished to make on yokozuna Asashoryu.

Uchidate, a playwright who ventured into liberal-leaning TV dramas (including one which contained a curious sex orgy), gained more sumo experience than any other YDC member by

coaching her university sumo team. A seeming prerequisite of YDC members is that they have no direct sumo experience; that they instead hail from the worlds of literature and academia, and – presumably – use their lyrical skills to best express the views of the common fan. Amazingly, it has taken over 50 years for serious debate to arise over whether ex-sumoists – special beings equipped with the bruising experience of daily keiko – should also sit on such a committee.

The April, 2008 souken, like those before it, was set up so that the sumoists on show only fought opponents of similar rank to their own. The disappearance of the upper makushita from moshi-ai geiko coincided with the appearance of lower-juryo wrestlers, who in time gave way to upper-juryo. Bouts were rarely inspiring, with wrestlers striking a careful balance between trying out new techniques on familiar foes and minimising the risk of injury ahead of the basho. In short, observers were more likely to be excited by the sheer sight of their heroes in the arena than by the bouts they actually fought. In the juryo practice, the biggest cheers were predictably reserved for the balding veteran with the

flamboyant salt-throw, 36-year-old Kitazakura.

Upper-juryo wound down and lower-makuuchi strode onto centre-stage, then, at around 10.20am, lower makuuchi politely retreated to tamari-seki and made way for the big guns. Chiyotaikai, Kaio and Kotomitsuki continued to attract support via their names alone as opposed to scintillating sumo, with the latter two being destroyed with machine-like efficiency by an unflappable Hakuho. A legendary souken replete with heroic upsets this was not to be.

Of grave disappointment to the crowd was the absence of a contest between fellow yokozuna. Asashoryu and Hakuho stayed conspicuously apart for the entire hour of contact time, thus depriving fans a repeat of their epic souken exchange in January 2008, which will surely become iconic in sumo circles. At the time, the lack of an all-yokozuna slugfest appeared to defeat the marketing objectives for the April 2008 souken. Come musubi-no-ichiban on senshuraku, though, when the obvious animosity between the grand champions spilled over, it was apparent that a souken match-up ran the risk of tarnishing

sumo's image more than enhancing it.

In general, the souken met with as much success as the NSK could reasonably have expected. A fair crowd turned up and expressed content at being able to sit closer to the stars than on a normal matchday. However, as weekday attendances in the ensuing May basho proved, a public souken akin to April 2008 will most likely not translate into larger sumo crowds. The very timing of such souken (7am!), while nobly

respecting the tradition of samurai warriors performing demanding tasks at unearthly hours, seemed far more suited to the die-hards than the waverers. And judging by the number of uninformed gaijin in the early-morning queue, a public souken risks taking revenue away from the NSK by offering 'one-time visitors' a free viewing that they might otherwise have paid for during a basho.

The next step

If future souken are to be opened up for public observation, careful

thought needs to be given to the target audience. The NSK can either follow the British Labour Party, and organise a souken which reaches out to new supporters, or imitate the British Conservative Party, long obsessed with winning old supporters back. It was unclear which objective the April 2008 souken was designed to pursue. But, enacted at the right time of day, with the right form of marketing, the idea itself, coupled with all other efforts at reform, has promise... much promise indeed.