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Q&A: The strategy and the pitfalls of linking a brand with a celebrity



Dave Czesniuk of the Center for Sport in Society and Andy Rohm of the College of Business Administration Photo by Lauren McFalls

January 14, 2010

Major companies often pursue a strategy of hitching their brands to a star to gain customer appeal and market share. How does this help the company, and what happens if the athlete or celebrity falls from public grace? In this Q&A, marketing professor Andrew Rohm addresses these questions from a business perspective, while David Czesniuk, of the Center for Sport in Society, considers the athlete's and the public's point of view.

Andrew Rohm, Associate Professor of Marketing, College of Business Administration

Companies often turn to athletes and other celebrities to endorse their brands and products. In what ways do these

endorsements benefit the companies?

Athletes and celebrities who endorse certain products and services can help companies project their desired brand image in a way that is immediately understandable to the public. For instance, Accenture's sponsorship of Tiger Woods helped a global company—but one with a name that carried little intrinsic public meaning—to project an image of performance, excellence and leadership with its "Be A Tiger" campaign.

It is no surprise, therefore, that Accenture was one of the first companies to pull out of its Tiger Woods sponsorship when the details of his affairs became public.

Moreover, it is the "fit" between the company and the star that often determines how successful the sponsorship can be. Woods' ongoing relationship with Nike has remained intact, in large part because of the close fit between his skills as a golfer and Nike's successful efforts to grow within the golf market. However, Buick's sponsorship of Tiger never really made sense because it was not a car brand that we could imagine him driving, as evidenced by his driving a Cadillac at the time of his Thanksgiving Day accident.

When a brand severs ties with a public figure, does the company suffer financially?

Usually brands sever ties with athletes or celebrities for good reasons: the star runs afoul of the law or represents himself or herself in ways detrimental to the image of the company. But there may be instances where public sentiment towards the athlete or celebrity is such that some consumers may discontinue doing business with the company to protest the sponsorship being dropped. This happened a few years ago with Pepsi. However, this is most likely a short-term response by consumers.

How does brand loyalty factor into the equation?

In many cases, consumers will develop a lasting affinity or loyalty to a brand simply because of the brand's endorsement of an athlete or celebrity. The most successful example of this is Nike's relationship with Michael Jordan. Some say that Jordan himself is the reason Nike has become the world's top-selling basketball shoe and apparel company.

In industries featuring undifferentiated and commodity-like products, it is sometimes a specific athlete or celebrity who helps to differentiate the brand in the mind of the consumer.

David Czesniuk, Director of Operations, Center for Sport in Society

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How do athletes choose the brands they agree to endorse?

While I'd like to think it's based on brands that best align with their values and personalities, often times I think their agents lead the way and base these agreements almost entirely on how lucrative they could be.

I'm sure some thought is given to the success or potential for success that the brand reflects. But I suspect that much more thought comes from the companies as they choose an athlete, because there is more risk for them, considering they are hitching their wagon to individual personalities who could experience drastic life changes at a moment's notice, as we've seen with Tiger Woods, (professional quarterback) Michael Vick, and (pitcher) Roger Clemens.

What is the impact on youth and high-school athletes of seeing their athletic heroes stumble to the point that they lose their endorsement deals?

One would hope that our youth would learn responsibility and accountability from such missteps, and that there are actually consequences, even for these seemingly super-human individuals. Unfortunately, I think that athletes who make serious errors in judgment often times are martyred by their fans, even before they have made up for their mistakes. There was a surge in Michael Vick jersey sales after his indictment and a surge in sales of Duke lacrosse merchandise after several players were accused of rape.

We want to encourage youth to value these "leaders" for their strengths and positive qualities, but to also appreciate them as human beings who are not immune from error, and who need to continue learning and growing just as everyone else does.

To learn more about the Center for Sport in Society, visit: http://www.northeastern.edu/sportinsociety/
To learn more about the College of Business Administration, visit: http://cba.neu.edu/

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