

The Use of Sports Celebrities in Advertising: Best and Worst Practices

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Abstract: When should we use an athlete, a sports star in advertising? Which type of product or service is best suitable for these stars to advertise? What can we expect from these ads? Who is the ideal sports star? Is it true that social media is going to transform this area as well? For our research we examined print ads and television commercials using famous athletes such as David Beckham, Cristiano Ronaldo, Rafael Nadal, Tiger Woods, Maria Sharapova or Serena Williams.

Keywords: Sports stars, advertising, personal branding, crisis management

1 Introduction

Sports stars live their lives in the limelight, however in recent years they have become the focus of media and public opinion, which can be seen in Forbes magazine as well. The American business magazine lists celebrities based on their income and media appearances in the press, television and on the Internet. In 2009, 18 sport stars made it to “The Celebrity 100” list among Hollywood stars and musicians.

The list also reveals which sport is most likely to produce these stars (at least in America): five tennis players (Roger Federer, Serena Williams, Maria Sarapova, Venus Williams, Ana Ivanovic), four basketball players (Kobe Bryant, Michael Jordan, LeBron James, Kevin Garnett), three racing car drivers (Kimi Raikonen, Jeff Gordon, Danica Patrick) two golf players (Tiger Woods and Phil Mickelson), two football players (David Beckham and Ronaldinho), one boxer (Manny Pacquiao) and one baseball player (Derek Jeter) are on the list. Out of all these players Michael Jordan is the only non-active sportsman. This indicates how hard it may be to keep incomes and media attention at a constant level, after “retirement”.

The other striking issue is the number of women on this list. The Williams sisters most probably are on the top 100 list because they embody the American dream, whilst the remaining three belong to the “hot babe” category. Many have searched Google Images for Ana Ivanovic, the Serbian tennis player. Danica Patrick racing driver poses for GoDaddy.com, showing her breasts. Finally Maria Sharapova’s example, who in 2008 made 22,5 million dollars out of which only 0,5 million was from tennis. We might add that she was injured in during this period; however that did not keep sponsors from using her. It was also interesting that in ads of the fashion brand Cole Haan, or in the TAG Heuer watch and in the Sony Ericsson mobile phone ads she posed wearing a black dress.



1. The star is the same and her outfits are almost identical but the brands are different:
Sony Ericsson, Cole Haan and TAG-Heuer

2 On the field and off the field

With this title we have arrived to the question of how a sport star can appear in an advertisement. There are three basic options:

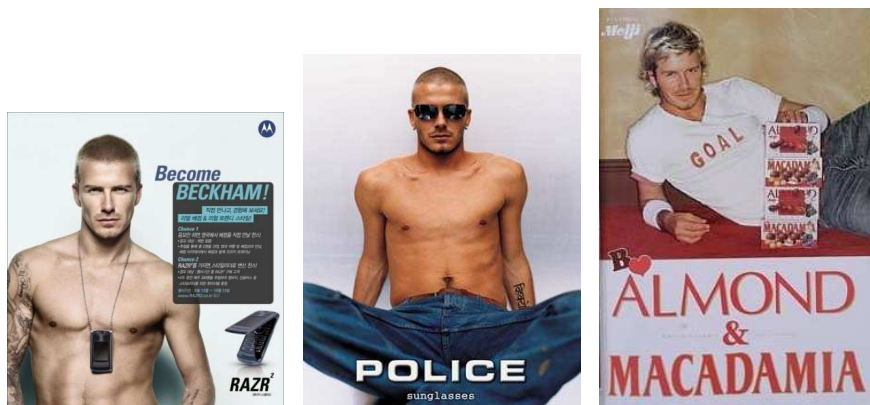
1. while playing sport, on the court,
2. while playing, but not on the court, but in a different environment
3. in plain clothes as a civilian.

Back to Sharapova, an example for the first option is when we see her strong shots. This led to the Canon Powershot camera ads, which said: “Make every shot a powershot!”

In another ad, the tennis player Roger Federer appears just when he is losing a point. Then he disappears for a while, during which strange sounds are heard from his “hiding place”. Moreover, both his opponent and the spectators are becoming irritated by his disappearance. Federer suddenly reappears with a giant ace, which is followed by a slogan and a brand name: “Fresh coffee when you need it! – Jura” At this point it becomes clear that the noise heard were coming from the sounds of making coffee.

“We thought a lot about how a world star could help us the most....” was how Szentkirályi (the Hungarian mineral water brand) introduced Luís Figo, winner of the Ballon d’Or (Golden Ball) award in their advertisement. In the ad, when the boss of the plant is not looking, Figo goes on to play football with the employees of the bottling plant. This and other similar ads belong to the category in which the sport star practices his or her profession in a different environment from the sports-ground.

Finally there is the third group, in which the stars are in plain clothes. This option is only available when these stars can be recognized without their usual outfit, as a civilian. What is more they have to be attractive in such an environment and attire. It is not surprising that Beckham is the one we see most often in this category: Police sunglasses, Motorola mobile phones, or Meiji Seika chocolates are among the advertisers.



2. Beckham is famous and attractive enough to show him as a civilian not as a sportsman in the ads

In these ads there are no references to sports. Naturally, this means that stars in this category need the most “talent” as an actor, whilst in the first two categories sport stars can be themselves. The one thing they do not need to do in any of the categories is delivering long speeches. For this we would need real acting abilities.

No wonder that Beckham out the hundreds of ads he did rarely had more than a couple of lines to say besides smiling. It raised a laugh when the frightful Manny Pacquiao got a monologue in an ad for VitWater (vitamin water) all because of his voice sounding like a little mouse.

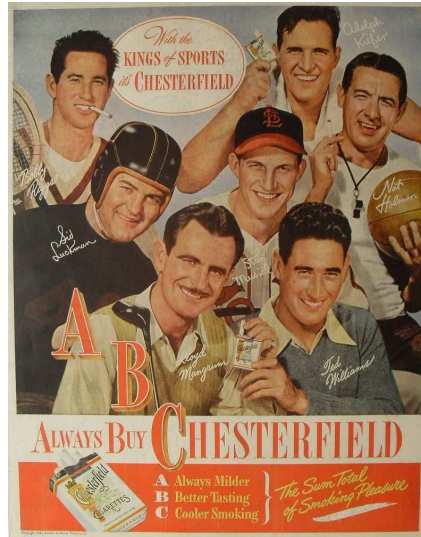
3 From sports outfit to perfume

On the same subject the valid question to ask is what product or service should a sports star advertise. First, it can be all those products, which any athlete needs: shoes, attires, balls, and rackets. The manufacturers can even choose to use the athlete's name for their products. The tip of the iceberg is when the athletes receive their own logo portraying their famous movement as did Nike with Michael Jordan's dunk or Adidas with Beckham's free kick.



3. When the logo portrays the player's famous move:
Michael Jordan (Nike) and Beckham (Adidas)

The second option is food and drinks: athletes need healthy food with more energy. This is how handball player Szabina Tápai became the face of Spar Natur Bio products, or the Williams sister of the "Got milk? Campaign. It is not as simple when athletes advertise soft drinks of sugar content as in the case of many footballers, including Beckham advertising Pepsi. According to some sources, Beckham terminated his contract in the US with Pepsi because of the many concerns regarding his "unhealthy co-operation" with them. Those times when Chesterfield cigarettes were advertised by athletes are long over...



4. Those times are over when cigarette brands used athletes in their ads

The third instance is when the athletes advertise things that are not directly connected to the sport, but are visible on the grounds. A company called Brylcreem manufacturing hair care products chose to employ the young Beckham at one time, due to his hair always being so “perfect”. The same goes for Clear shampoo and Cristiano Ronaldo. The watch manufacturer Timex noticed that in some sports the athletes leave their watches on, so they chose several sports where the athlete’s arm played an important role. Boxers, baseball players, golfers verified that Timex watches keep ticking even after a hundred thousand shot.



5. Sportsmen as proof: boxers, baseball players, golfers verified that Timex watches keep ticking even after a hundred thousand shot

Last, but not least: it is indeed possible for athletes to advertise products and services besides the already mentioned three categories and of course outside their grounds. Beckham and Ronaldo had successively taken part in Armani underwear and Castrol motor oil ads. Steffi Graf and Andre Agassi posed with Louis Vuitton bags, while Manny Pacquiao gave his face to Nikon Coolpix. And the Hungarian water-polo team members talk to their captain using the services of Vodafone.

Interesting, but not surprising that the athletes' own brands appear in the fashion industry. Björn Borg, the famous tennis player is currently better known for his bags and underwear. The Beckham family among other is well known for their brands of jeans and perfumes. Cristiano Ronaldo and his sister have their own fashion brand called CR7 (CR being the monogram of the player and 7 stands for his number in the Portuguese team).



6. The biggest sports stars establish their own brands:

DVB stands for David and Victoria Beckham and CR7 stands for Cristiano Ronaldo

4 The ideal sports star

What is ideal sport star? Who do sponsors look for? The first and most important aspect is choosing an athlete, who is outstanding in his or her field of sport. Red Bull for example only sponsors athletes, who are in the top 3 of their sport worldwide. Yes, worldwide! The second aspect is that the chosen athlete needs to come from a sport that is important and viewed by our target group. In the case of Red Bull there are certain sports which only have few thousand followers, yet these sports are paramount to the company's image and reputation. For the Hungarians it pays to do ads featuring canoeing or water-polo stars, however, these ads on a global scale have little effect. The previously mentioned and discussed sports and their representatives enjoy the most serious sponsors, in other words the tennis players, basketball players, racing car drivers, footballers, golf players, boxers and baseball players.

The third aspect is that the athlete must be famous enough to make the advertising brand famous. At the same time – being the fourth aspect – it is also important that the public like this athlete. Only with a positive image can an athlete provide the brand with the same positive image.

It can easily be the case that the athlete matches the first three aspects, but not the fourth. Take a world famous football player: one of the best in his sport, moreover, football has a high viewer rating; and because he played for Inter, Barcelona and Milan, he is well-known to many. Still it can be said that he is not very sympathetic to many: yes, it is Imbrahimovic.

To be honest, there is a fifth aspect: the athlete to be attractive. There is no question about Ronaldinho or Rooney being a better player than Beckham. But while the first two are often seen in Nike or Pepsi ads, Beckham is by no coincidence asked to star in many other brand advertisements (and in many cases posing as a “civilian”). Ronaldinho on the other hand is often associated with Jar Jar Binks of Star Wars and Rooney’s nickname is simply “Shrek”.



7. Although Ronaldinho and Rooney are better players than Beckham, they are not attractive enough for the advertisers and customers

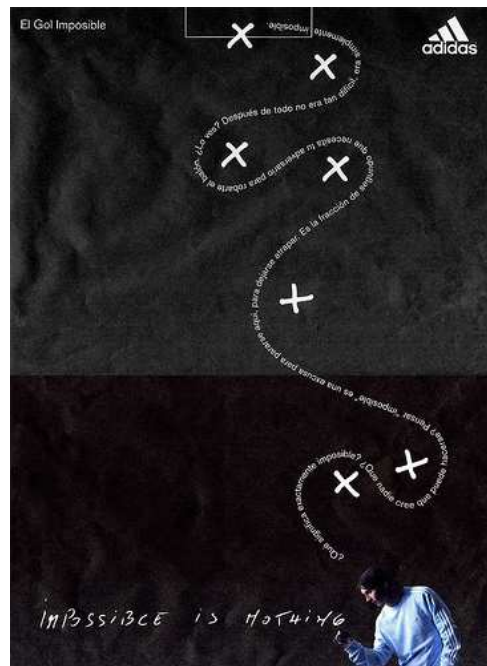
5 Brave sponsors

This is what leads to some creative application of these stars: in the Nike ad for example. Rooney is portrayed as a homeless person with a long beard after missing a pass that lead to England losing the match. This is the real bravery of sponsors: they do not have to portray sport stars as always being successful. In the ad of EA Sports “FIFA 2010” football players Benzema, Walcott, Schweinsteiger, Xavi, Ronaldinho and Hungarian Dzsudzsák are doing kick-ups while blindfolded, needless to say they are rather clumsy this way. It is also not surprising that the most liked Beckham ad is the one in which during a Manchester-Juventus game he is being substituted and forced to leave the field. On his way to the locker rooms he meets a boy and asks to drink from his Pepsi. The boy then asks Beckham for his shirt – but only to wipe the Pepsi can after Beckham had a drink from it. It turns out the boy is a Juventus fan.

Contrarily many ads featuring athletes transmit the same message, which says: “The athlete is successful. We are also successful. Together, we are even more successful.” But this boredom does not increase sales.

6 Social audience

On the other hand being fresh does help sales. Advertising with athletes requires a quick reaction from the sponsors. They need to congratulate them for their efforts of various, but good results. The best example perhaps is from Adidas dating back to the 18th of April 2007, when Lionel Messi scored a wonderful goal to Getafe: starting from the midfield, dribbling everyone on his way until he scored for his team. On the same week Adidas came out with an ad saying: “The impossible goal. Impossible is nothing.”



8. Lionel Messi's impossible goal in the Adidas ad

We also have to take into account Facebook and other social media channels focusing on our products and services, moreover on our advertisements and even our athletes.

The 2008 EA Sports “Tiger Woods PGA Tour” game was introduced with an error left in the program: the golfer in the program could hit the ball standing on water. This was later uploaded to Youtube by one of the users and named the “Jesus shot”. This very user was surprised the most when EA Sports in its ad replied to him by his name: “Levinator 25! You seem to think your Jesus shot was a glitch in the game. It’s not a glitch. He’s just that good.” – Whilst the ad showed Woods walking on the water to hit a ball, which was resting on a leaf.

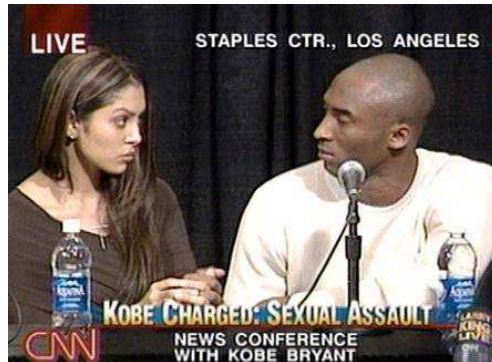
7 Crisis in the athlete’s life, crisis in the brand’s life

Talking of Tiger Woods we cannot overlook his sex scandal from 2009. The positive image he had worked on for a long time was destroyed within moments. His “behaviour” did not shed a positive light on the sponsors and most of them are still trying to back out of their agreement. These long-term contracts do not take these sorts of cases into account. So the sponsors have no other alternative, but to keep paying Woods, while minimising his appearance in their ads.



9. Tiger Woods’ sponsors had serious trouble after his sex scandal

Kobe Bryant, basketball player also had serious problems, when in 2003 he was accused of sexual harassment by a hotel receptionist. As it turned out that there was no violent act on his part, only sex, which understandably was not appreciated by his wife. According to experts this instance in his case was positive in terms of building his image: prior to this event Bryant was seen as a “good kid”, which very much equals with boring. Although some sponsors like McDonald’s and Nutella had left him, Nike stayed. Now almost ten years after the incident, Bryant is Nike’s number one in basketball.



10. Kobe Bryant's cheating on his wife shocked everyone in 2003 but the personal brand recovered and now he is Nike's number one face in basketball

Beckham's image in 2004 was also shaken when it turned out that he was exchanging text messages of sexual content with his PR assistant. Marks & Spencers among other things chose not to continue their cooperation with him due to this incident. Surprisingly, it was the same time that Gillette had a fresh start with Beckham.

While in the previous three cases there were wives involved, it was not the case with C. Ronaldo, who was seen with Paris Hilton or in worse case with five prostitutes after a Manchester victory, yet these instances were brought up against him.

8 Short conclusion

All of the above shows that there is no perfect athlete for advertising purposes. Personalities are fragile, but there are good candidates, whom if we use carefully, can be a great asset to our brand building strategy.

Acknowledgment

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