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A New Image: Female Athlete-Endorser

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine the increase in endorsement marketability of professional female athletes. Professional female sports figures are becoming more popular and as a result are receiving larger endorsement contracts from sport specific and non-sport specific corporations. The 1996 Summer Olympic Games produced more female endorsers than in any past Olympic Games. A growing trend among American corporations is to increase the use of female athletes as product endorsers secondary to the growth of the female sports market and the stagnation and saturation of the men's market. With the development of professional women's leagues, corporations are interested in hiring these new sports figures. Corporations are competing for the use of sportswomen as advertising models in an attempt to boost product image, sales, and loyalty. However, female professional athletes are still well behind professional male athletes when it comes to product endorsement opportunities.

Introduction

Male athletes have monopolized media exposure in the marketing arena of product endorsement at the same time receiving the most lucrative endorsement opportunities, while female professional athletes have been given far fewer opportunities for media exposure and product endorsement (Levin, 1992). Male professional athletes such as Michael Jordan and Shaquille O'Neal endorse a number of products. By some estimates, Jordan earns over \$40 million a year and O'Neal \$12.5 million from endorsement opportunities alone (Spiegel, 1997). According to Gotthelf (1998), female athletes' earnings from endorsements is far below the multimillion-dollar deals of many top male athletes. However, in the wake of the 1996 Olympic Games, many marketing experts have realized that female athletes possess endorsement potential equaling that of many male athletes. Fitzgerald (1996) has suggested that soon after the 1996 Olympic Games were over, female athletes had more opportunities to endorse consumer products than previous years. Female athletes from the American women's softball, soccer, and basketball teams have captured corporate executives' attention. Superstars such as Mia Hamm and Jackie Joyner-Kersey have chosen to use their celebrity status to leap into endorsement opportunities.

Companies are targeting the new generation of sport-women due to the apparent saturation of the men's sporting goods market (McAllister, 1996). Corporate executives inside and outside the sporting-goods industry no longer stereotype females as sex objects and homemakers realize that female consumers make 80% of all purchasing decisions (Hilliard, 1996). Executives have also realized that you do not sell to women the same way you sell to men. In fact, companies have been hiring sports specialists to direct women's sports product development (Russell, 1994).

Changing Attitude

The realm of female participation and spectatorship of sporting events has increased at

unprecedented levels, even in male-dominant sports (McAllister, 1996). This, change coupled with the increased role that females play in purchasing decisions, has moved marketing executives to strategically promote the use of professional female athletes as product endorsers (Shani, et al., 1992). More and more companies are developing advertising campaigns to focus on the female market segment (Miller, 1994). The increased attention given to the women's market can primarily be attributed to the rapid socio-cultural changes in the 1970's (Shani, et al., 1992). This is evident by the pursuing careers and the increasing number of women participating in sports.

In the past, companies tended to sell products in a unisex fashion (Rozek, 1984). Advertising executives were concerned that female consumers were likely to be intimidated by the use of professional athletes as endorsers (Shani, et al., 1992). In recent years, companies in the sporting good business, the car and tire industry, computers and games market, and money management, have created separate advertisements aimed specifically at the female market (Anderson, 1994; Levin, 1990). The change in marketing today may be attributed to a shift in how sports itself is perceived: as an enjoyable source of achievement, stress reduction, and camaraderie ("Fitting into the women's field," 1986). Female consumers are more likely to associate with a product that is pitched by a female sports figure than a male sports figure (Russell, 1994; Burton, et al., 1994). In addition, the female consumer has more buying power and product loyalty than her male counterpart, and marketing executives have taken notice (Rubel, 1995).

Consequently, the advertising market has discarded the past, unauthentic view of the female athlete. Companies have found themselves competing with each other to sign female athletes with strong media images to capture the new market ("Women in the fast track," 1995). Corporate America can no longer ignore the fact that in the marketplace the female consumer has become as competitive as female athletes have become on the playing field.

Women and Professional Sports

Typically, women who have participated in team sports at the collegiate level leave the campus and, until recently, find little professional opportunity to participate in sport leagues in the United States (Clements, 1987). In fact, many females choose to leave the United States and play team sports in countries where they are offered increased financial security and greater endorsement opportunities.

However, since the 1996 Olympic games, popularity of women's sport and interest in professional teams have increased. In the fall of 1996, two women's professional basketball leagues began play in the United States, the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) and the American Basketball League (ABL). Professional women's softball and volleyball leagues are already underway, and negotiations are also underway for the first women's professional hockey league. A women's World Cup Soccer event is slated to be held in the U.S. in 1999 (Feitelberg, 1997). The possible inception of these new leagues may stem directly from the media popularity of these sports during the 1996 Summer Olympic and the 1998 Winter Olympic Games. Companies are especially attracted to women's basketball because the sport appeals to crucial segments of the market: young professional women and young families (Cohn, 1995).

The possibility of female media team stars adds a new trend to one already in place. In the past, corporations have traditionally preferred female endorsers from individual sports (i.e. gymnastics, swimming, tennis, etc.). Female sports pioneers such as Billy Jean King and Chris Evert (tennis), Donna DeVarona and Diana Nyad (swimming), Dorothy Hamill (figure skating), Nancy Lopez (golf), and Mary Lou Retton (gymnastics) have paved the way to increased opportunities for endorsements among female athletes. This trend has not abated. If anything, this tradition of female endorsers from individual sports has intensified. In 1994, Steffi Graf and Gabriele Sabatini both broke into Forbes magazine's top money earners list: Steffi Graf grossed \$8 million a year, \$6.5 million of which came from endorsements, and Sabatini earned \$4.9 million, with endorsements

accounting for \$4 million (Lane, 1994b).

The fact is, female tennis players continue to sign endorsement deals. Tennis stars, Monica Seles, Mary Jo Fernandez, Arantxa Sanchez-Vicario, Martina Hingis, and Venus Williams have individual endorsement contracts (Actman & Gallagher, 1996; "In the same old orbit," 1995; "Rising star," 1993). Yet, in the 1996 and 1997 issues of Forbes magazine, not one female athlete appeared in the top 40 money earners in professional sports (Lane & Spiegel, 1996; Spiegel, 1997).

In addition to the commercial prominence of tennis, other individual women's sports have only recently broken into the media spotlight. Marketing experts agree that the time is right for major female athletes to promote consumer products (Rubel, 1996). The signings of Olympic athletes such as Amy Van Dyken (swimming), Kerry Strug and Dominique Moceanu (gymnastics), Mia Hamm (soccer), Jackie Joyner-Kersey (track and field), and Tara Lipinski and Michelle Kwan (figure skating) point to a predictable trend in post-Olympic endorsement signings (Anderson, 1994; Fitzgerald, 1996). However, the sports markets are clearly diversifying.

The most recent trend in female endorsements appears to be a move toward signing individual sports figures from team sports. Current basketball stars from the WNBA and ABL such as Rebecca Lobo, Teresa Edwards, Dawn Staley, Lisa Leslie, and Jennifer Azzi already possess contracts with shoe companies. A variety of athletes outside the realm of basketball have also attracted endorsement contracts. Specifically, Lisa Fernandez (softball), Julie Foudy (soccer), and Lisa Masakayan and Gabrielle Reece (beach volleyball) have entered into endorsement contracts ("Women on the fast track," 1995). Nike has even developed the first female signature shoe named after Sheryl Swoopes "Air Swoopes." Nike hopes to create the same demand for a signature line of shoes among girls as Air Jordan created among boys (Feitelberg, 1995). Athletic footwear companies hope that female consumers will want to "be like" Swoopes or Lobo, the way the male consumer wants to "be like" Mike (Michael Jordan) ("Women on a fast track," 1995). Marketing executives are counting on female athletes' appeal to gain public attention and impact consumer brand preferences (Bultmeyer, 1994).

While the number of female endorsers has dramatically increased, their male counterparts continue to dominate the marketing arena. It is estimated that in the past year over 200 women athletes have signed endorsement deals with various companies (Feitelberg, 1996). Ray Pond, women's basketball executive for Nike reported that, Nike has fifty female athletes under contract and supply additional athletes with Nike athletic apparel. Furthermore, Reebok, Champion and Converse have pledged their allegiance to women's sports by sponsoring players or teams in the WNBA and ABL (Feitelberg, 1997). However, female athletes are far below male athletes. In the National Football League alone, 250 athletes have endorsement deals with Nike, and Reebok has a stable of 400 athletes from football, baseball and soccer (Miller, 1995).

Despite this increase in female endorsement contracts, male athletes continue to dominate the number of lucrative endorsement contracts. There are reasons to believe that women are a viable marketing reality, but companies have not kept pace with market realities. Companies such as Nike and Reebok have clearly shown that top level success in marketing goes hand in hand with reaching the rapidly rising numbers of female consumers (Feitelberg, 1995). It is estimated, for example, that female consumers spend \$5.4 billion annually on athletic footwear and apparel, \$200 million more than spent by men ("Women on the fast track," 1995).

As early as 1995, Reebok took a "female" turn in advertising in response to this market reality. Kathy O'Connell, director of women's global sports marketing for Reebok, stated that in 1996, Reebok would incorporate "more female athletes into television and print advertising as well as in-store promotions than in the past" (Tedeschi, 1995, p. 14S). Most importantly, according to Branch (1995), "targeting sports consumers is . . . profitable, due largely to the fact that many male-dominated sport markets are now saturated and stagnant" (p. 10). It seems reasonable that other companies should aggressively pursue female athletes as endorsers to improve their market positions.

Marketing the Female Athlete

Like their male counterparts, female athletes have a short career compared to other professions. Consequently athletes, both male and female, will use every possible means to increase their earnings during and after their careers, including the negotiation of endorsement contracts to supplement earnings. Most endorsement arrangements are expected to last a minimum of one year, and ideally longer (Miciak & Shanklin, 1997). Since the 1996 Olympics Games female athletes have a good chance of supplement their income through product endorsements.

Athletes will usually pursue two types of endorsements, "sport specific products" and "non-sport specific products." Sport specific products are articles necessary for the athlete to play his or her sport (shoes, rackets, clothing, etc.), and non-sport specific products include all other products (automobiles, soft drinks, etc.) or services (restaurants, communications technology, etc.) not related to the sport itself. Not surprisingly, many of today's top professional female athletes have signed endorsement contracts with sport apparel companies (Tedeschi, 1995).

Prior to signing an athlete to an endorsement contract, a marketing executive should:

- Assess the athlete's marketability.
- Locate a natural link between the athlete and the product, create an association recognizable to the market audience.
- Determine how "hot" (popular) the athlete is at the present time.
- Know if the athlete is truly likable.
- Know if the sport celebrity will have real impact in conveying genuine conviction about the benefits of the product.
- Know the athlete's past and present endorsements history, to ensure no marketing conflicts.
- Know the athlete's past history (Renker, 1993; Schaaf, 1995).

The marketability of an athlete depends on tangible factors, such as level of skill and success in the sport. Marketability also depends on many intangible factors. Such factors include the consumer's perception of the athlete's level of skill and success in his/her sport and individual characteristics, such as image, charisma, physical appearance, and personality (Schaaf, 1995). For good or ill, a highly marketable athlete with an established association to a product also creates an association with the company in the mind of the consumer. Companies that feature female athletes as endorsers tend to show a more personal side of the sports figure (Bultmeyer, 1994).

Because an athlete's image can be a double-edged promotional sword, companies seeking celebrity athletes should exercise caution when offering endorsement contracts. Ask Prince (racket-maker), Diadora (Italian apparel maker), Oil of Olay (beauty cream), and other sponsors who felt the negative impact to their business after Jennifer Capriati, (tennis player) a product endorser, was charged with possession of illegal drugs (Lane, 1994a; Price, 1994). Allegations of illicit, unethical, unusual, or even slightly unconventional behavior can tarnish the image of a corporation or brand name product (Miciak & Shanklin, 1997). No sponsor wants the smoking gun of scandal or potentially unscrupulous characteristics to be tied to its precious brand name (Schaaf, 1995).

Corporate Selection of Endorsers

Verducci (1993) reported that many endorsement contracts were awarded to athletes based on the athlete's popularity, talent, and charisma. Celebrities with high profiles were believed to be more persuasive and influential on consumer behavior. According to Brandon Steiner, president of Steiner Sports Marketing, "corporations are looking for that one player who goes above and beyond, and the team's success is at least partly responsible because of them" (Fink, 1994, p. 1). Unfortunately, companies often measure value in terms of "highlight time," the frequency with which a player appears on ESPN's "SportsCenter" program (Gotthelf, 1998).

The use of celebrities as a marketing strategy contributes to brand name recognition and creates a positive association with the endorsed product (Petty, et al., 1983; Kamins, 1989; McCracken, 1989). Marketers believe that celebrity endorsements are likely not only to persuade consumers to purchase the endorsed product, but also to develop a loyalty to that product (Heath, et al., 1994; Kahle & Homer, 1985; Schaaf, 1994). The use of athlete-endorsers for consumer products creates an image of credibility (Walker, 1990; Ohanian, 1990). More specifically, the star athlete endorser "integrates a personality into the product's image, accentuating the association" between athlete and product (Schaaf, 1995). Amid the sea of consumer products, the use of an athlete endorser may have the capacity to hold viewers' attention and penetrate the clutter of brief and numerous advertising spots that compete for attention (Miciak & Shanklin, 1997).

Corporations continually bid for professional athlete-endorsers. The selection of an influential and effective sport celebrity is a critical process for advertisers. Miciak and Shanklin (1996) reported that to ensure success a celebrity should meet five baseline criteria, he or she needs to be: trustworthy, readily recognizable by the audience, affordable, at little risk for negative publicity, and appropriately matched with the intended audience. The advertising executive may consult the Performance-Q Ratings Service to estimate a celebrity's endorsement potential. The Sport-Q rating is an annual composite of a celebrity's familiarity and likability. In 1988, for example, Mary Lou Retton received a Sport-Q rating of 53, the highest among all sports figures at that time (Raskin, 1989), while in 1996 Michael Jordan received the highest rating with a score of 50. Sport-Q rating is a straightforward measure of a sport celebrity's potential marketability.

Conclusion

In the past, corporations avoided giving endorsement contracts to female athletes on the basis that female consumers did not respond to female athletic images the same way men responded to male athletic images. Advertisers feared that consumers would view female athletes as overly "masculine" and react negatively to such an image (Levin, 1990). The advertising industry even used female models to portray female athletes instead of the athletes themselves (Kort, 1987). However, given the potential increase in media exposure for women's sports, the already large and growing female sports consumer market, and the potential stagnation of the male sports markets, corporations should actively pursue female athletes as endorsers.

Through endorsement deals, female athlete is finally beginning to be taken seriously by the corporate world and by the general public. Consumer product companies are always looking for the next certifiable, identifiable star (Schaaf, 1995). Increasingly, women are becoming these stars. Perhaps with the addition of a female professional basketball league, female athletes may have more opportunities to endorse consumer goods. As female professional sports become more common place in the media, than the value of female endorsements contracts will increase.

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