Syracuse University
SURFACE

Sport Management

David B. Falk College of Sport and Human Dynamics

8-2-2010

When Athletes Become Legends, Do Their Sponsors Also

Rick Burton
Syracuse University

Norm O'Relly

Follow this and additional works at: http://surface.syr.edu/sportmanagement

Part of the Sports Sciences Commons

Recommended Citation
Burton, R. and O'Reilly, N. (2010), "When athletes become legends, do their sponsors also?" Sports Business Journal, August 2-8, Vol. 13, No. 15, 22.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the David B. Falk College of Sport and Human Dynamics at SURFACE. It has been accepted for inclusion in Sport Management by an authorized administrator of SURFACE. For more information, please contact surface@syr.edu.

ACTIVATOR
Everyday Engagement. Ongoing Recapping.
Click Here To Learn More

STREET & SMITH'S SBJ SBD SportsBusiness JOURNAL

SBJ/20100802/Opinion

When athletes become legends, do their sponsors also?

RICK BURTON AND NORM O'REILLY

Published August 2, 2010

RICK BURTON

NORM O'REILLY

At 2:58 p.m. local Vancouver time on Feb. 28, Sidney Crosby went from superstar to legendary icon status as more than 65 percent of his fellow countrymen (and women) watched him score a thrilling overtime goal to help Canada win Olympic hockey gold at the 2010 Olympic Games.

A win for Crosby, a win for Canada, a win for the Vancouver Olympic Games, a win for the International Olympic Committee … but was it a win for those IOC sponsors that spent small fortunes associating with the Games and, de facto, the athletes? And, what about Crosby's long-standing sponsors, the ones that have been with him for years and have built marketing programs around him?

Does an epic performance for an already established charismatic superstar elevate him to the level of some of the personalities like Michael Jordan, Arnold Palmer and the others noted in the table?

The Hockey News recently reported that Crosby was on the verge of signing a five- to seven-year, $10 million deal with Reebok, which the article reported would be the richest endorsement deal in NHL history. With the addition of Reebok, it would give Crosby, who has already won a Stanley Cup with Pittsburgh, a stable of loyal sponsors including blue-chip brands such as Tim Hortons, Gatorade and Bell.

To explore this concept, we reached out to our friends at Gatorade Canada to learn more about the concept of instant-icon status for a player and whether the ensuing euphoria spreads to the sponsor as well. Like any good evaluation, we needed to start from a benchmark. Gatorade has been with Crosby since it signed him as a 17-year-old in 2005. Pre-Olympics internal market research by Gatorade in Canada told us:

1. Between 2007 and 2009, consumer tracking studies found almost one-third of Canadian respondents purchased Gatorade product with a particular Crosby/NHL promotion. So, at some level, the Crosby sponsorship was already driving purchase intent in some demographic segments

2. A December 2009 omnibus of 1,000 interviews with Canadians over the age of 15 regarding corporate spokespersons found that Crosby had exceptional awareness scores across Canada:

a. 78 percent awareness

b.85 percent popularity, with 53 percent at very popular (top 3 on a scale of 10)

c. 79 percent believe Crosby an "excellent fit" with Gatorade

d. Nearly 1 in 5 Canadians (17 percent) able (unaided) to name Gatorade as a Crosby sponsor

e. Gatorade was the second-strongest linked sponsor to Crosby (after Tim Hortons) and strongest linkage to "G" of all six spokespersons in the study

Memorable Athlete-Sponsor Associations

Athlete	Sponsor(s)
Lance Armstrong	Nike, U.S. Postal Service
Dale Earnhardt Sr.	GM Goodwrench, Wrangler
Derek Jeter	Gillette, Gatorade, Ford
Michael Jordan	Nike, Gatorade, McDonald's, Hanes
Peyton Manning	MasterCard, DirecTV, Sprint, ESPN
Arnold Palmer	Pennzoil, John Deere
Richard Petty	STP
Maria Sharapova	Nike
Venus Williams	Reebok
Tiger Woods	Nike, Gillette

So people know Crosby, he's very popular, and a large segment of the population knows well that Gatorade sponsors him. But is the Crosby-Gatorade association now known to more than 17 percent of Canadians? Has it moved to where one-third of the population knows of the association, toward the levels achieved by only the greatest of athlete sponsorships (think Michael Jordan and Nike in the U.S.)?

"Gatorade is and always will be about being associated with top athletes and helping them take their game to the next level," said Dale Hooper, head of marketing for Gatorade in Canada. "We definitely feel our association with Sidney is stronger after Feb. 28 than it was before, given his legendary status in Canada. Other athletes realize that Gatorade fuels Sidney, and can fuel them to successes also."

Andy Harkness, an executive at SDI Marketing, who has worked on the Gatorade file and with Crosby for many years, said, "Sidney's performance at the Olympics had the ability to take Gatorade somewhere where the Gatorade brand couldn't go by itself and, in turn, has validated Gatorade as the sports authority through the brand's link to Sidney. We've leveraged this to build excitement with Gatorade's customers and our sales teams already."

So, do the sponsors become legends as well? It's not yet scientific but it would appear the right sponsor, proactively positioned with the right athlete can certainly sell more product while driving higher awareness, positive public relations and untold YouTube hits for their brand.

Legendary? Maybe. Profitable? Most certainly. The trick it would appear (perhaps as it has always been) is to identify the athletes before they are world-beaters and have your marketing campaign geared up for the moment they put it all together.

Brands and marketers also must recognize that working with celebrities has its risks. If an athlete gets arrested or revealed in a tawdry or salacious scandal, brands have to be prepared to withstand the public relations heat or implement an exit strategy.

Rick Burton is (rhburton@syr.edu) is the David B. Falk Professor of Sport Management at Syracuse University. Norm O'Reilly (norman.oreilly@uottawa.ca) is an associate professor of sport business at the University of Ottawa.

Related Topics:
Opinion

Return to top