Exercising the Effectiveness of Athlete Celebrity Endorser Characteristics and Product Brand Type: The Endorser Sexpertise Continuum

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Research Problems

The purpose of this paper is to examine elements of successful athlete celebrity endorsements. The paper addresses why some athlete celebrities can only endorse a limited range of related products, while other athlete celebrities can endorse a wide range of unrelated products. Optimum combinations of athlete/product endorsement match-up are also discussed, and a rubric for addressing this match-up called the Endorser Sexpertise Continuum is introduced.

Importance of Issues

Athlete celebrities, as well as product brand marketers, have much at stake when entering endorser agreements. Forbes reported that the 10 richest male and female athletes made a combined $600 million in salary, prize money and endorsements, including men’s professional golfer Tiger Woods, who alone earned nearly $100 million in sponsorships in 2008. Interestingly, many top athlete endorsers make considerably more money as endorsers than as athletes in their chosen sports. For example, from June 2007 to June 2008, female professional golfer Michelle Wie earned $12 million in endorsement money, but only $39,000 in prize money. Similarly, former professional basketball player Michael Jordan made $45 million in endorsements during the same period, despite not having participated in his sport for several years. With such considerable sums at stake, brands must carefully consider the celebrities they entrust with their brands’ images, as well as the perceived relationship between the celebrity persona and the endorsed product.
Issues

This paper proposes athlete celebrities are brands unto themselves and must manage their brand carefully to maximize their endorsement marketability. A favorable and consistent image in the minds of consumers becomes important for both the athlete celebrity brand and for the branded product he/she is endorsing. Positive and negative spillover effects individually impact both the athlete celebrity brand and the branded product, similar to the concept of brand alliances. Since brand image is composed of an accumulation of meanings, each time a brand associates with another brand, the experience impacts and contributes to its overall image. In other words, each current endorsement impacts the future endorsement opportunities of the athlete celebrity.

Summary

So what limits the endorsement opportunities for an athlete celebrity? How does one determine the best branded products to endorse? These questions can be answered simultaneously. An effective athlete celebrity endorsement depends upon the endorser’s placement on the Endorser Sexpertise Continuum and the product’s brand concept type. The left side of the Endorser Sexpertise Continuum is anchored by acquirable expertise, which includes the concepts of expertise and trustworthiness of the endorser. The further the endorser falls toward this side of the continuum, the more likely he/she will be limited to endorsing products related to his/her own area of expertise, since consumers have higher involvement with these kinds of products and therefore will give much consideration to the products’ functional properties and will process the information using a piecemeal approach. The right side of the Endorser Sexpertise Continuum is anchored by likeability, which includes the concepts of likeability and attractiveness of the endorser. The further the endorser falls toward this side of the continuum, the more likely he/she can endorse both products related to his/her area of expertise and products removed from that area of expertise. Consumers are drawn to these products through their liking of these endorsers. In this case, consumers’ product involvement is much lower, so they become primarily interested in symbolic properties of these products and will use more holistic, categorical approaches. Athlete celebrities who are known for their likeability or overall image are not as limited in products that they can endorse.

Analysis

Implied in the proposed Endorser Sexpertise Continuum is the notion that celebrity endorsers can move along the continuum in either direction. If a celebrity becomes associated with something negative (such as former National Football League quarterback Michael Vick’s alleged involvement in dog fighting), he/she can slide to the left of the continuum, making him/her less marketable. Conversely, if celebrities develop enduring, likeable images, they may move to the right of the continuum, thereby becoming more marketable.

Discussion

Athlete celebrities need to guard the perceived images of their own brands. If they are only known for their expertise, their endorsement opportunities may be limited to their areas of expertise. If they are able to transcend this perception to include greater likeability and attraction, they increase their likelihood of endorsing products unrelated to their areas of expertise, thereby becoming more generally marketable. Summarily, selection of athlete celebrity endorsements should be based on brand images that they can contribute to the endorsed brand, as well as their match to the brand concept of the endorsed branded product to create a seamless match between the endorser, brand, and product.