Tennis Brands (Mostly) Getting It Right: Advertising To Females And Males In A Crowded Marketplace

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Abstract 2014-203
Saturday, May 31, 2014
9:20 AM
Poster
(Urban Room)

Tennis equipment brands serve a large consumer market of over 13 million male (52%) and female (48%) players between the ages of seven and 75 (Sport Business Research Network, 2013). Tennis players are recurrent consumers spending an annual total of $303,000,000 on rackets, $421,000,000 on tennis shoes, $115,000,000 on tennis balls, and $124,000,000 on logoed clothing, all purchased at sporting goods or big box stores, specialty shops, and online. Consumers can choose from among 19 racket brands, 14 tennis shoe brands, 39 clothing brands plus several boutique varieties, and six tennis ball brands. In addition, each brand has several styles and models of premium performance products available, and they also manufacture numerous types of recreational gear. In essence, the tennis gear industry operates within a high-choice supply-heavy marketplace and brands must advertise proficiently in order to persuade their potential consumers.

Brands frequently use visuals via print advertising to persuade consumers to purchase products because print conveys messages quickly (Chow, James, Sisk, & Cole, 2011; Messaris, 1997). Sport-related brands, especially in the tennis industry, are famous for using testimonial-style ad executions by signing popular or successful players to act as endorsers in ad campaigns. Amos, Holmes, and Strutton (2008) attribute the success of endorsements to meaning transfer, a long established theory (McCracken, 1986; 1989) that clarifies the meanings that culture associates with consumer goods, celebrities, and endorsers. Culture defines celebrities by their social roles and media portrayals. When credible, trustworthy celebrities endorse a product (Amos, Holmes, & Strutton, 2008; Ohanian, 1991) to which they have an obvious link (Boyd & Shank, 2004; Lynch & Schuler, 1994; Rossiter & Smidts, 2012) their cultural meanings transfer to the product’s brand and consumers are thus influenced to try the products in order to transfer those meanings to their own lives. Because sport is so highly valued by current culture, coaches and athletes are very popular as product endorsers. (Bush, Martin, & Bush, 2004).

The rationale driving tennis brand interests in endorsements is linked to the trend that leisure-time players will watch their favorite professional player and purchase that players’ exact equipment (Nocera, 2007, Rossiter & Smidts), because a top player’s endorsement makes a buyer more certain and confident in their purchase (Kim & Pennings, 2009). With a total market sales value of $963,000,000 (Sport Business Research Network, 2013) at stake, it is critical for brands to reach customers by using their endorsers in ads that are meaningful to buyers. Research indicates that sport products ads are most effective, particularly in reaching females, when models or endorsers are depicted in active poses (i.e., engaged in movement), connoted as strong (i.e., suggesting competence), portrayed as athletes or at least in athletic roles, and photographed from appropriate (e.g., not provocative) camera angles (Cuneen, 2001; Cuneen & Claussen, 1999; Cuneen & Spencer, 2003; Cuneen, Spencer, Ross, & Apostolopoulou, 2007; Duncan, 1990; Duncan & Sayaovong, 1990; Ross, Ridering, & Cuneen, 2009). This inquiry addressed how tennis’ endorsers are featured in tennis brands’ persuasion art (i.e., the ways female and male endorsers’ are represented in tennis brand print ads) to determine disparities and/or similarities in depictions. Since the tennis market is split nearly evenly between genders, special attention was devoted to the ways tennis brands feature endorsers to make their brands attractive to all potential consumers. Specifically, the following questions were considered: Were endorsers featured in active poses? Were endorsers featured in such a way as to connote strength? Were endorsers portrayed as athletes? Were endorsers photographed in appropriate camera angles? Finally, were female and male endorsers equally balanced as the endorser or model most prominently featured in the ads?

Content analysis was used to assess the visual content/persuasion art used in 227 images in 193 advertisements featuring player endorsers or human models appearing in Tennis Magazine between January 2008 and December 2012. Only name brand rackets, shoes, and clothing ads that featured a player, celebrity, famous or unknown human model, or an artist’s drawing of a human were analyzed. Rackets were the most repeated advertised product (N=141) and Wilson was the racket brand that most frequently used endorsers (N=41) with Babolat (N=28), Yonex (N=25), and Head (N=24) following. Shoes (N=25) were the next most frequently advertised piece of gear with K-Swiss...
using endorsers (N=19) most frequently. K-Swiss also used endorsers most frequently in their clothing ads (N=16). Babolat’s Rafael Nadal was the most frequent endorser of rackets (N=21), along with Wilson’s Roger Federer (N=14), followed by Babolat’s Andy Roddick (N=13) and Kim Clijsters (N=10). Brands’ female and male endorsers were overwhelmingly featured in prominent positions (no less than 75% of the time for all brands) and in active poses 28%-100% of the time with no substantial differences between female and male endorsers. Connotations were mostly neutral (14%-86%) for males and females, although Dunlop and Yonex featured two female endorsers, Dominika Cibulkova and Ana Ivanovic respectively, in sexual connotations. Brands used their endorsers in athletic roles (21%-86%) with camera angles photographed from straight-on planes (70%-100%).

In summary, when tennis brands used endorsers, they mostly featured their players as competent and expert, unlike many brands appraised in past research. However, it was interesting to note the abundance of tennis brand ads that did not feature an endorser at all and only pictured the product itself accompanied by technical explanations of product superiority. It was also interesting to note the absence of Nike over the five years of Tennis Magazine ads. Although Nike is more known for their television and Internet campaigns, three of the current top players who happen to rank among the best tennis athletes in history (i.e., Federer, Nadal, Serena Williams) are completely outfitted in Nike gear; as such, one might expect a Nike print presence due to their brand stature on court.

The benefits of using endorsers are well documented and tennis brands are wise to feature top players in their marketing strategies. However, Rovell (2010) and Nocera (2007) are quick to point out that pro players tend to alter their gear for their own personal comfort and often switch equipment when a better financial deal is offered by a competing brand. Thus, as brands continue in their attempts to influence consumers via endorsers, and consumers transfer meaning to identify with their favorite pros by buying their endorsed products, it is likely true that endorsement deals benefit the endorsers much more than the brand and the consumer.