

Chicago Daily Law Bulletin®

VOLUME 165, NO. 154

LAW BULLETIN MEDIA

Edgy sponsorship deals featuring outspoken athletes the in thing

An increasing number of U.S. athletes and sponsors are teaming up to embrace hot-button social justice issues and actively court controversy, following the high-profile trail blazed by Nike and former National Football League quarterback Colin Kaepernick.

Is this a short-term trend or the beginning of a new era in sports marketing?

Procter & Gamble, through its Secret women's deodorant brand, has partnered with the U.S. women's national soccer team to promote gender equality in sports, especially equal pay for female athletes. The company earlier this year announced a campaign for equal pay featuring the 2019 World Cup champions that included a full-page ad in *The New York Times* and a \$529,000 donation to the team's players' association.

The amount represents an additional \$23,000 for each of the 23 players on the World Cup team to help make up for the pay disparity between the men's and women's teams, according to P&G.

It's a bold, new stance for the Secret brand, which has long promoted women's empowerment and participation in sports but has not made such a pointed statements in the past.

In advance of the World Cup, Secret partnered with the team as part of its "All Strength, No Sweat" campaign and created a video featuring team forward Alex Morgan encouraging women and girls to cheer each other on in their endeavors.

In another example of brands supporting athletes and their causes, the women's team co-captain and winger Megan Rapinoe starred in a short ad for sports drink maker BodyArmor. Rapinoe, a self-proclaimed "activist" who may be as well known for her war of words with President Donald Trump as her goal-scoring skills, is also a leading proponent of equal pay for female athletes.



SPORTS MARKETING PLAYBOOK

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The BodyArmor spot capitalized on Rapinoe's reputation as the outspoken LGTBQ advocate who once called herself "a walking protest." She was, in fact, one of the first Caucasian athletes to kneel during the national anthem in solidarity with Kaepernick's protests against police brutality against African Americans.

Nike is also a sponsor of the women's team. Moments after the team won its fourth World Cup title, the company aired a 60-second video paying tribute to the team and its athletic accomplishments and highlighting the impact the team has had off the pitch, all with the empowering message "women will conquer more than just the soccer field."

In the past, many brands have preferred to play it safe by steering clear of controversy.

Athletes, on the other hand, have been using their platforms to express their beliefs for decades — not always garnering

the most supportive of receptions. U.S. African American track gold and bronze medalists Tommie Smith and John Carlos, for example, sparked outrage when they bowed their heads and raised their fists at the medals ceremony during the national anthem at the 1968 Olympic Summer Games in Mexico City.

Smith and Carlos were speaking for themselves; Kaepernick is backed by Nike. The sports apparel giant has managed to make provoking debate a viable advertising strategy. Nike weathered a storm of criticism for making Kaepernick and his social justice views the face of the company and survived protests by angry customers who burned Nike shoes and swore off the company's products.

Industry watchers have speculated that Nike is unique in being able to use athletes' protests over social injustices to its advantage, citing the company's market dominance and status as the NFL's official apparel sponsor.

Its prime customer base also happens to be young men living in cities, who are more likely to support Kaepernick's anti-police brutality message.

Nike, which first signed Kaepernick in 2011, has also forged a deeper endorsement relationship in which Kaepernick is more than just a paid spokesman. Kaepernick's input has helped shape the direction of Nike's marketing campaign, such as when he advised the company earlier this summer to ditch a new sneaker design that included the American Revolution-era U.S. flag with 13 stars in a circle.

Nike quickly scrapped the design when Kaepernick said the "Betsy Ross" flag carries a perceived connection to slavery. The move sparked both a fresh round of outrage from segments of the public and a renewed commitment by Nike and Kaepernick to their shared message.

Will other brands follow Nike, P&G and BodyArmor's lead?

Nike has proven it's possible for a company to survive a firestorm of criticism and public protests and remain on top. Protests against the sports apparel giant eventually died down and ultimately the company experienced a positive impact on its sales. A smaller company without Nike's history of supporting activists and social causes might have a harder time taking a comparable marketing risk.

On the other hand, the public is generally becoming more receptive to marketing campaigns with political or social implications. Nearly three-quarters, or 74 percent, of consumers surveyed around the world last year said they expect brands to take a stand on "important issues," according to WE Communications. That figure rose 4% over the previous year.

It's clear that brands looking to follow the leaders should align with high-pro-

file athletes that share similar outlooks on sensitive social issues as the brand's core customer base and consider the endorsement relationship a long-term commitment.

However, the partnership model created by Nike, P&G and BodyArmor likely won't work for everyone. Capitalizing on social controversy to win over like-minded consumers will require brands to take a firm stand on their beliefs as well as their tolerance for risk.