

The Perfect Pitch? Music Stars Marketing Sports Apparel

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The ongoing convergence of sports and entertainment brands has taken on a new wrinkle. In an effort to reach new consumers and leverage appeal among their coveted 13 to 25-year-old target audience, bellwether sports apparel brands are venturing beyond their traditional relationships with sports teams, leagues, and individual athletes by linking their brands to those in the music industry.

Rick Burton, director of the Warsaw Sports Marketing Center at the University of Oregon, highlighted sports' version of the transitive property of equality when suggesting that, "If sports equals entertainment and music equals entertainment, then sports equals music."

At first blush these strategic alliances appear to make extraordinary marketing sense for all involved. After all, many athletes seek to become hip-hop artists while more than a few musicians and entertainers dream of playing in the big game. And millions of youngsters in these brand's target markets hope to do both.

Case in point: Reebok has paired Jadakiss, Scarface, Fabolous and Shakira in feature ads with athletes such as Philadelphia 76ers guard Allen Iverson and Houston Rockets guard Steve Francis. To further integrate this marketing initiative, Reebok has partnered with music stores, some of which will display new shoe lines along side their CDs.

Although this approach is intriguing, these brands must be very careful not to strike a sour note that will damage their core brands, a particular concern among these brand's more traditional strategic alliances.

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Michigan, have also faced public relations challenges associated with these relationships.

In fact, since the No. 4 Chris Webber Michigan jerseys that were bought by fans of all ages and societal classes during the emergence of the "Fab Five" in 1989 contained both the Michigan name and the Nike swoosh, both organizations enjoyed increased notoriety and exposure. This notoriety and exposure has taken on a different, and far less desirable, feel throughout much of this year since it has been disclosed that a prominent booster had given money to Webber during his playing days at Michigan.

Unlike powerhouse sports brands like the University of Michigan, many of today's hot bands and musical groups may prove to be fads, forcing apparel companies to play musical chairs—changing the musical acts with which they are aligned as frequently as athletes change uniforms. To hedge this risk, these companies can align with established stars. But while such acts as the Rolling Stones, Aerosmith and The Who may remain widely popular, they largely lack the edginess and contemporariness many sports and fashion brands seek.

Aligning with musicians also brings with it the same concerns faced when retaining athletes as spokespeople. This requires companies to measure the risk

associated with these entertainers and the potential weapons, drugs, and domestic violence charges that all too frequently seem to follow them.

However, these issues may pale in comparison to the fact that many entertainers wear their favorite causes on their sleeves. That is, they are more inclined to be social and political activists, and incorporate their strong belief systems into their lyrics and communicate them while on tour. By comparison, most athletes, especially those that are extremely marketable, like Nike spokesmen Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods, have long been criticized for not being more outspoken on such issues as human rights.

Given the relatively vocal nature of activist musicians and entertainers, apparel companies—particularly those that have come under fire for alleged human rights violations at Southeast Asian manufacturing facilities—must accurately assess the marketing risk associated with their high profile marketing alliances.

The combination of sports, entertainment and music brands has emerged as an important element of pop culture, a highly public and potentially profitable part that enables brands to cross promote what they hope will become lifestyle brands linked to marketable personalities. But any failure to recognize the potential fallout caused by these creative alliances could easily result in these sports brands singing the blues.

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