

Chapter 8

An Endorsement Selection Model for Sports Celebrities in China

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ABSTRACT

Celebrity endorsement is a critical and positive commercial promotional tool. With the increasing number of international sports celebrities, many sporting and non-sporting goods companies use such celebrities to promote their products. This study develops a model for selecting sports celebrity endorsers. A Chinese sporting brand company is the target of this study. The proposed model adopts the modified Delphi method to identify suitable criteria and applies the analytic hierarchy process (AHP) to determine the criteria's relative weights. The selected company exemplifies how the model can guide the selection of sports celebrity endorsers. The model ranks the importance to the target company of five criteria: trustworthiness, match-up, attractiveness, risk and expertise. The proposed model allows the company to select sports celebrity endorsers effectively, and contributes to academia and commerce.

1. INTRODUCTION

With improvements and developments in communication technology, most consumers are exposed to thousands of voices and images in magazines and newspapers as well as on billboards, websites, radio and television every day. In the modern age of digital convergence and media competition, every brand attempts to steal at least a fraction of a person's time to inform him or her of the amazing and different attributes of their product. The challenge of the marketer is to find a hook that will hold the subject's attention. In helping to achieve this, the use of celebrity endorsers is a widely used marketing strategy.

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As economy structures change and global media develop in the world, 'sport' is gradually becoming increasingly commercialized and industrialized. Those athletes who give outstanding performances in their areas become sports celebrities. Recently, China has seen a rise in local sports celebrities, such as basketball player Yao-Ming, track and field player Liu-Xiang and swimmer Sun-Young. Because of their attractive and likeable qualities, many industries, including sporting and non-sporting brand companies, want to use these sports celebrities to not only create and maintain attention but also achieve high recall rates for marketing messages.

In the past 20 years, increasing number of companies has invested large sums of money to align their brands and themselves with endorsers (Hsu & McDonald, 2002). When celebrities endorse a product, the meaning will develop around a particular celebrity, or at least this is hoped for by advertisers, and then transfer to a company, brand or product (Erdogan & Baker, 2000). Companies have been increasingly hiring celebrities from a particular sport to feature in their advertisement campaigns (Sherman, 1985; Levin, 1988). This marketing strategy is the most effective in increasing sales and recall value of a brand for them (Agrawal & Kamakura, 1995). On the other hand, this study also refers to the powerful effect of celebrities on advertisements (Kamins & Gupta, 1994; Tripp et al., 1994; Till & Busler, 1998). Such endorsers are seen as dynamic, with both attractiveness and likeable qualities; companies plan for these qualities to be transferred to products via marketing activities (Hsu & McDonald, 2002). To increase the fame of product and brand image, Lei and Sung (2009) assert that most advertisers use spokespeople to create an in-depth understanding of the product and brand image in consumers' mind as quickly as possible.

The process of choosing the brand endorser is significant and serious. Celebrity/product fit is thought to function as a key determinant of endorsement effectiveness (Erdogan & Baker, 2000). Simmers et al. (2009) point out that the goal of endorsement is to combine the celebrity with the brand, thus becoming a whole image. Celebrity endorsement literature supports the positive effect of trustworthiness and attractiveness on effectiveness (Chao et al., 2005). For many companies, the image of celebrity is equal to that of a brand. Therefore, the relationship of endorsement between celebrity and brand is just like brand alliance (Knight & Hurmerinta, 2010; Simmers et al., 2009; Seno & Lukas, 2007). In the ideal endorsement relationship, the meaning of endorser and brand can transfer back and forth between each other and increase the image of celebrity, becoming a situation of reciprocal symbiosis (Knight & Hurmerinta, 2010; Seno & Lukas, 2007). Alternatively, some celebrities may transfer a certain image of danger, risk or toughness that may appeal to some consumers while alienating others. Therefore, the process of selecting endorsers should be more thoroughly examined (Clinton et al., 2008).

However, there is a distinct situation in China's market. Recently, with the transformation of the economy in China, the part of the economy and the legal system governing the management of athletes has become problematic. For example, the intangible assets rights of Chinese sports celebrities are considered to belong to China. Chinese sports celebrities may not have their own intangible assets rights. The issue of Chinese swimmer Sun-Young, in 2011, is a good example. According to the depiction in China's local media Xinmin News in 2011, the Chinese government can use the intangible assets of local sports celebrities arbitrarily because of the 'underlying rules' of Chinese sports.

The rule-document 505, paragraph 1, section 1-promulgated by the China State Sports Commission in 1996, focuses on managing the business activities of an athlete, such as advertisements. The whole meaning of the rule is, 'The intangible assets of an athlete belong to China.' However, the rule was repealed in 2006, and revised to exclude 'All assets of an athlete belong to China' in the new regulations.

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