

Study finds female athletes rarely and ineffectively used as ad spokespeople

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University of Delaware study finds female athletes rarely used as ad spokespeople and when they are, advertisers most often do it poorly. Credit: Evan Krape, University of Delaware

Your best chance to see a female athlete endorsing a product will be during the next few weeks. The Olympics' commercial breaks may be littered with female swimmers, runners and gymnasts, but don't expect to see them much again until the next Olympics. American companies rarely employ female athletes as spokespeople and when they do, according to two University of Delaware professors, they most often do it poorly.

John Antil and Matthew Robinson's upcoming article in the *Journal of Brand Strategy* suggests advertisers' tactics are creating a cycle of failure for female athlete endorsers. Antil and Robinson, both faculty members

in the Alfred Lerner College of Business and Economics, co-authored the article along with Rick Burton, David B. Falk Professor of Sport Management at Syracuse University.

"The way female athletes are being used as endorsers negatively impacts their effectiveness and reduces wider opportunities for other female athletes," Antil said.

Sex Appeal Backfires

He points to advertisers' focus on youth and sex appeal, rather than other defining characteristics, including athletic ability. The researchers conducted nine focus groups on the topic. They asked participants to react to ads and discuss their perceptions. Ads that focused on athletes' attractiveness often elicited [negative responses](#) from female participants.

For example, the 2009 'Got Milk?' ad featuring swimmer Dara Torres in a skimpy bathing suit did not impress.

"Respondents suggested this was a poor image for an outstanding athlete who achieved so much while raising a family," the authors said.

"Featuring Dara Torres as a middle-aged single mother, able to balance family with work commitments, might be more effective than highlighting her [physical attractiveness](#) at age 40. "

Research shows women now purchase or influence 85 percent of all brand purchases. Likability and similarity play key roles in the effectiveness of a celebrity endorsement. Marketers seem to be ignoring both when it comes to female athletes. Researchers found when the endorser was much younger than the targeted consumer, the large difference in age made it difficult for female consumers to relate to them. Consequently, the credibility of the young endorser and the product promoted suffered.

When sex appeal was highlighted, consumers responded negatively, especially when comparing themselves to the spokesperson. The studies' authors say highlighting the similarities between the endorser and the targeted consumer could be a more effective strategy.

The "Who are You?" Factor

Since the introduction of Title IX, the number of female athletes has skyrocketed. Women's participation in high school sports has increased by 904 percent. This year, for the first time, the number of women competing on the American Olympic team surpasses the number of men and pre-Olympics publicity is focusing heavily on female athletes.

Yet, the study's authors wrote that in developing a list of well-known female athletes "the selection of female athletes to include was far more difficult to generate than anticipated."

Familiarity, along with likability and similarity, is a hallmark of an effective spokesperson. This lack of familiarity hinders female athletes work in the advertising world, Antil said.

Other than during the Olympic Games, female athletes have very little opportunity for visibility. Consequently, the authors say, the best opportunity for substantial endorsement contracts for [female athletes](#) will be determined over the next few weeks. Though the odds are against them, a female showing performance, personality, and an interesting personal profile could become a new endorsement powerhouse.

Provided by University of Delaware

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