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Commentary

Celebrities Are Only Human

by David Moritz (/publications/author/6291/david-moritz/), , Columnist, 3 hours ago

Maria Sharapova was recently punished by the International Tennis Federation with a two-year playing ban for testing positive for meldonium, a pharmaceutical that increases oxygen in the blood. She claims that she was prescribed this drug for medical reasons and didn't notice when it became a banned substance.

The drug is obscure; it's made in Latvia and only legally available in Russia. She's appealing the ruling, but everyone seems to believe that she was taking the drug for performance enhancement. Nike, Tag Heuer and Porsche have suspended their promotional relationships, while racquet manufacturer Head has stood by her.

What are the implications for luxury brands seeking to partner with celebrities in the wake of yet another public disgrace from a promotional figure? As a general rule, luxury brands should not use celebrities as spokespeople. They overshadow the brand and they open it up to a lot of risk — because celebrities are only people, too. They can't be perfect — who can? Yet, there can be so much to gain in short-term sales with the use of celebrities that it will continue to be common practice.

Therefore, my recommendation is a system whereby celebrities who want to position themselves for maximum sponsorship revenue are encouraged to consider reputation and good behavior as part of their value. In Sharapova's case, if her brand value is purely for performance reasons, this controversy may reduce her value to zero temporarily. However, if it's more about her personality, then there may still be some value to her as a spokesperson even in light of cheating controversy — renegade reputations can make sales too. Still, the general guidelines for luxury brands and celebrities are fairly clear — if you must use celebrities to get sales, use them more as models in your advertising than as spokespeople on behalf of your brand.

Make sure that your brand is the dominant factor in the marketing and they merely support it. This is better for position of a luxury brand, and it mitigates the risk that their personality — and possible controversies — are immediately connected to the brand. All brands should be striving to create a marketplace where reliability in celebrity sponsorships is monetarily valued.

I'd like to make a wider point about celebrities in our culture. We have a very interesting relationship with our heroes today. I think we ask too much of them and put too much pressure on them — they are only human. When a celebrity is paid to do a job like promotional marketing, that's a different story and brands need to take appropriate action if the agreement is violated.

However, these controversies and their effects are connected to our current dysfunctional relationship with celebrities. How have we come to a place where being beloved means that your privacy is utterly taken from you, and you are put in a gilt glass box, always on display? In Sharapova's case, cheating in sports is not a