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Nike Returns to Familiar Strategy With Kaepernick Ad Campaign

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Nike has long relied on controversy in marketing an image of edgy youthfulness. The company had Charles Barkley declare that he was not a role model and Tiger Woods remind people that some country clubs would turn him away because of his skin color. It dressed the tennis player Andre Agassi in jean shorts.

This week Nike returned to that tradition, revealing Colin Kaepernick, the polarizing former N.F.L. quarterback, as a **face of a major new marketing campaign** honoring the 30th anniversary of its iconic “Just Do It” slogan, a move that may prove to be its most controversial yet.

In an era rife with divisive political discourse, most major public companies try to avoid taking stances that could make customers angry, particularly when rabid social media campaigns can cast any decision into a larger social statement. Yet Nike has signed Mr. Kaepernick, perhaps the most divisive American athlete of his generation, to a lucrative new contract and will produce branded apparel with his name and image.

[Related: How Colin Kaepernick controls the N.F.L. protest discussion without speaking]

In 2016, Mr. Kaepernick began kneeling during the national anthem to protest racism, police brutality and social injustice, and a handful of other players followed suit, kneeling, locking arms or raising their fists during “The Star-Spangled Banner.” President Trump turned it into a political fight through a series of critical tweets and public statements about how the protesting players should be fired.

Nike’s strategy risks alienating countless consumers who believe the national anthem protests that Mr. Kaepernick began are disrespectful. Shares of Nike on Tuesday were down \$2.60, or more than 3 percent, though it is unclear how much of that could be blamed on Mr. Kaepernick or other market forces.

The decision will undoubtedly have ramifications for the N.F.L., which is caught in the middle of the debate — the league is a major partner of Nike’s but is also being sued by Mr. Kaepernick, who has **accused the league’s 32 teams of colluding** not to give him a contract because of his on-field demonstrations.



Serena Williams hit the headlines for her eye-catching, body-hugging black catsuit at the French Open. Tournament organizers recently outlawed the suit.

Christophe Simon/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

However, it could pay off among Nike's base of young customers and fans, according to analysts, and signals that political stances could be seen as winning issues by some brands. Nearly two-thirds of individuals who wear Nike in the United States are under 35 years old, and are much more racially diverse than the baby boomer population, said Matt Powell, a sports industry analyst at the NPD Group.

"I think Nike went into this absolutely knowing what they were doing, with the intention that some people would be offended," Mr. Powell said. "But the people buying their products, whether they are a millennial or a Gen Z consumer, those consumers want their brands to take visible, social positions, and this is an opportunity for Nike to do just that," he added.

A recent survey from Morning Consult echoes this. Urban and young consumers were more likely to say they would react favorably to a company that advocated the right of protesters to kneel during the national anthem. Indeed, on social media — where the nation's youth live and breathe — Mr. Kaepernick attracted more than one million responses on Instagram, Facebook and Twitter in the hours after he announced the Nike partnership, according to ListenFirst, a social media analytics company.

On Twitter, more than 100,000 posts in the first 24 hours included the hashtag #BoycottNike, but the firm's analysis showed "more support for Nike and Kaepernick than we see negative actions taken against them," said Jason Klein, co-chief executive of ListenFirst. The campaign, which was announced with a simple tweet by Mr. Kaepernick, has also generated at least \$43 million in free advertising for Nike, according to one estimate.

The Kaepernick partnership comes on the heels of a **report by The New York Times** that Nike was a hostile and abusive work environment for women. In August, two women **filed a class-action lawsuit against Nike** claiming gender-pay discrimination and sexual harassment.

Still, the timing of the partnership with Mr. Kaepernick caught many industry veterans, as well as the N.F.L., off guard. For more than a year, Nike has virtually ignored Mr. Kaepernick and declined to use him in any of its marketing campaigns, even though he has been under contract to the Oregon-based company since 2011.

The new partnership comes months after Nike extended its agreement with the N.F.L. to provide on-field uniforms for all 32 of the league's teams. On Monday, when asked if Nike had informed the N.F.L. about the campaign beforehand, a Nike spokeswoman said that "Colin is not currently employed by an N.F.L. team and has no contractual obligation to the N.F.L."

The N.F.L. did not address the campaign Monday, then released a statement Tuesday in which it said, "The social justice issues that Colin and other professional athletes have raised deserve our attention and action."



Former San Francisco quarterback Colin Kaepernick appears as a face of the Nike advertisement marking the 30th anniversary of its "Just Do It" slogan in this image released by Nike. Nike

President Trump was quiet on Twitter, but The Daily Caller published an interview with Mr. Trump late Tuesday in which he said Nike sent a “terrible message” in making Mr. Kaepernick one of the faces its campaign, and noted that the company was a tenant of his and paid “a lot of rent,” referring to its Niketown store on East 57th Street in New York. Mr. Trump has repeatedly criticized players, team owners and the N.F.L. for not forcing players to stand for the national anthem, framing the players’ acts of protest against racism and police brutality as unpatriotic and disrespectful.

The N.F.L. has struggled to manage the criticism. It enacted a new rule requiring players to stand during the national anthem or to remain in the locker room, then put the rule on hold after several owners said they would not penalize players and the N.F.L. Players Association vowed to challenge it.

Similarly, sportswear companies have stumbled when addressing social justice campaigns and Mr. Trump. When Under Armour’s chief executive, Kevin Plank, offered light praise to the president in early 2017, he ignited a firestorm that drew threats of a boycott of the company’s products as well as sharp criticism, **notably from the N.B.A. star Stephen Curry**, who endorses Under Armour products.

Nike, though, has a history of pushing headfirst into of-the-moment debates, whether through a sleek, socially pointed advertisement, or with the provocative clothing and shoes its superstar athletes wear.

“Nike from Day 1 has really been a brand that has stood up to and stood for things that were important to them and important to their athletes, so I think there’s a little precedence there,” said Mary Scott, a president at UEG, a sports, entertainment and lifestyle marketing agency.

Last year, as a part of Black History Month, Nike released a campaign titled “Equality” that featured LeBron James, Serena Williams, Kevin Durant and others. When French Open officials announced this summer that Ms. Williams’s black catsuit would no longer be permitted attire on the tournament’s courts, Nike tweeted in response, “You can take the superhero out of her costume, but you can never take away her superpowers.”

In the end, there might be two simple explanations for Nike’s move: money and attention. Mr. Kaepernick’s jersey was among top 50 in sales during the second quarter of 2017, even though he was not on an N.F.L. roster.

“When’s the last time we talked about a Nike campaign?” Ms. Scott said. “They have so many that are so great. But there seems to be a pointed effort around this that we might not have seen in a while, especially around really hot-button topics that now the world, not just the sports world, are really grappling with.”

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