

**Mini-case Study:
Nike's "Just Do It" Advertising Campaign**

According to Nike company lore, one of the most famous and easily recognized slogans in advertising history was coined at a 1988 meeting of Nike's ad agency Wieden and Kennedy and a group of Nike employees. Dan Weiden, speaking admiringly of Nike's can-do attitude, reportedly said, "You Nike guys, you just do it." The rest, as they say, is (advertising) history.

After stumbling badly against archrival Reebok in the 1980s, Nike rose about as high and fast in the '90s as any company can. It took on a new religion of brand consciousness and broke advertising sound barriers with its indelible Swoosh, "Just Do It" slogan and deified sports figures. Nike managed the deftest of marketing tricks: to be both anti-establishment and mass market, to the tune of \$9.2 billion dollars in sales in 1997.

—Jolie Soloman
"When Nike Goes Cold"
Newsweek, March 30, 1998

The Nike brand has become so strong as to place it in the rarified air of recession-proof consumer branded giants, in the company of Coca-Cola, Gillette and Proctor & Gamble. Brand management is one of Nike's many strengths. Consumers are willing to pay more for brands that they judge to be superior in quality, style and reliability. A strong brand allows its owner to expand market share, command higher prices and generate more revenue than its competitors. With its "Just Do It" campaign and strong product, Nike was able to increase its share of the domestic sport-shoe business from 18 percent to 43 percent, from \$877 million in worldwide sales to \$9.2 billion in the ten years between 1988 and 1998. Nike spent \$300 million on overseas advertising alone; most of it centered around the "Just Do It" campaign. The success of the campaign is that much more remarkable when one considers that an estimated 80 percent of the sneakers sold in the U.S. are never used for the activities for which they have been designed.

Nike's marketing tactics in the '80s, and in particular its campaign against Reebok, gambled on the idea that the public would accept sneakers as fashion statements. Nike later cashed in on the jogging/fitness craze of the mid 1980s, during which its "Just Do It" campaign expanded to attract the female and teenage consumer, in addition to the stalwart 18 – 40-year-old male consumer. (Nike was losing ground to Reebok during this time, thanks to the explosion of

aerobics.) Phil Knight, the founder and CEO of Nike, suffused his company and ads with the idea of the intense, inwardly focused competitor. The ads rarely focused on the product itself, but on the person wearing the product. Heroes and hero worship abound on the Nike campus in Beaverton, Oregon.

The “Just Do It” campaign seemed to capture the corporate philosophy of grit, determination and passion, but also infused it with something hitherto unknown in Nike ads—humor. Nike had always been known for its “detached, determined, unsentimental” attitude. “In a word, [Nike is] cool.”

The new ads retained that attitude, but several of the original 12 “Just Do It” ads incorporate jokes, explicit and implicit, to make their point. The Bo Jackson ad stands out. Jackson is seen working out at several different activities, joking while on a bike machine, “Now when is that Tour de France thing?” and after slam dunking a basketball contemplates “Air Bo.” “I like the sound of that,” he says.

The “Just Do It” campaign received mixed ratings, ranging from “an instant classic” to “sociopathic.” One critic went so far as to say the ads were “an impatient-bordering-on-contemptuous exhortation to the masses. Cool is one thing. Poverty of warmth is another.” Eventually the campaign was credited with embracing not just resolve and purpose, but also the “beauty, drama and moral uplift of sport—even, every now and then, fun.”

Linking the Campaign to Consumer Needs

Through its “Just Do It” campaign, Nike was able to tap into the fitness craze of the 1980s. Reebok was sweeping the aerobics race and gaining huge market share in the sneaker business. Nike responded to that by releasing a tough, take-no-prisoners ad campaign that practically shamed people into exercising, and more importantly, to exercising in Nikes.

The “Just Do It” campaign was also effective in reassuring consumers that the brand they picked, Nike, was a quality brand. This was most effectively portrayed by celebrity sports figures such as Bo Jackson, John McEnroe and later, Michael Jordan. If Michael Jordan can play an entire NBA season in a pair of Nikes, certainly the average weekend warrior can trust the shoes’ durability.

Celebrity endorsements also appealed to the consumers’ sense of belonging and “hipness,” as Nike became a self-fulfilling image prophecy: if you want to be hip, wear Nike; if you are hip, you are probably wearing Nike. The “Just Do It” campaign was able to turn sweaty, pain-ridden, time-consuming exercise in Nike sneakers into something sexy and exciting. Perhaps most importantly, even those who were not in fact exercising in Nikes (the vast majority) still wanted to own them. By focusing on the aura and image conveyed by the fitness culture, Nike was able to attract those who wanted the image without incurring the pain.

Linking the Campaign to Strategy

Nike was in a tough spot in the late 1970's. It was being swamped by Reebok's quick initiative on designing aerobics shoes and needed to respond dramatically and forcefully. It could be argued that the "Just Do It" campaign was not only about sneakers but about Nike's own renaissance. No longer content to be the choice running shoe of a few thousand marathoners and exercise nuts, Nike wanted to expand its operation to target every American, regardless of age, gender or physical-fitness level. "Just Do It" succeeded in that it convinced Americans that wearing Nikes for every part of your life was smart (the shoes are designed for comfort) and hip (everyone else is wearing them, you too can belong to this group.) Nike took its own advice and "Just Did It" by directly attacking Reebok in the sport-shoe market.

Why Was the Campaign Successful?

The timing of this campaign could not have been better. Americans were buying exercise equipment at a record pace in the mid 1980s, and body worship was at an all time high. Nike tapped into consumers' desire for a healthy lifestyle by packaging it into a pair of \$80 sneakers. The ads were often humorous, appealing to the cynic in all of us, while imploring consumers to take charge of their physical fitness. The ads made starting an exercise regime seem like a necessity, and the way to start exercising was to buy Nike merchandise.

More importantly, by owning Nikes you were instantly a member of a desirable group. The campaign was easily identifiable (to the point that Nike eventually did not even bother to display the word "Nike" in commercials—the swoosh was enough) and stayed true to its message.

Resources

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