

A place where sponsors sign athletes

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Marketers have been playing a new, more cautious game when it comes to signing athletes as endorsers, winnowing their rosters of jocks peddling products to proven performers with national — or international — profiles like LeBron James, Tiger Woods, Peyton Manning, Serena Williams and Derek Jeter.

The rising costs of signing athletic talent to build brands — not to mention deals gone sour because of shortcomings in the professional or personal arena — have made advertisers wary of rookies, single-game sensations, one-season stars or even talents with local appeal.

So what is a player like Drew Brees, the quarterback of the New Orleans Saints, to do? He is no slacker, to be sure, but neither is his surname Manning.

Mr. Brees and his representative, Chris Stuart of Encore Sports and Entertainment, have signed with a company called Brand Affinity Technologies, which offers a Web site (brandaffinity.net) as a one-stop-shopping opportunity for advertisers seeking star power in more efficient, and affordable, forms.

"It ends up benefiting all the partners in a short amount of time," Mr. Brees said in a telephone interview after the Saints defeated the New York Jets this month, adding that a deal was "in the works" for him to endorse the Ford brand sold by Ford Motor, "which would start off regional and potentially go national."

Brand Affinity's goal is to automate the process by which marketers offer contracts to athletes, along with the process by which ads featuring those endorsers are created and produced. The Web site promises that those transactions will take no more than 96 hours.

It provides "a quick turnaround for something that would normally take months," Mr. Brees said. "A company can contact a player, come to an agreement and the next day the ads could be up."

That fast pace, said Brian Bos, senior vice president and convergence director at Team Detroit — the alliance of WPP agencies that work for Ford Motor — "reduces risk and provides flexibility, because you're not tied into long-term deals."

"We can change out the talent very quickly," he added, citing a campaign in the Detroit market for the Ford Fusion that was created in the spring to feature a Brand Affinity athlete, Nicklas Lidstrom of the Detroit Red Wings, as that hockey team played in the Stanley Cup finals.

Currently, Mr. Bos said, there are campaigns for the Ford Taurus in local markets using Brand Affinity athletes like Brandon Jacobs of the New York Giants and Cris Carter of the Minnesota Vikings.

In addition to the agreements with the athletes, Brand Affinity has signed deals with the Microsoft Advertising division of Microsoft, for online ads; CBS Outdoor, a unit of CBS, for billboards, signs and posters; the Emmis Radio division of Emmis Communications, for radio commercials; and The San Diego Union-Tribune, owned by Platinum Equity, for print and Internet ads.

Athletes are "human capital brands," said Ryan Steelberg, president and chief executive at Brand Affinity in Irvine, Calif., who share in an estimated \$3 billion paid each year to celebrity endorsers.

Although “the days of someone right out of the draft getting a multimillion-dollar shoe deal are over,” Mr. Steelberg said, large sums are being spent on the handful of big sports names, active and retired, who appear in multiple campaigns.

“Relative to the cost of the superstars, you could potentially activate 5, 10, 25” players who are popular in local or regional markets, he added.

Still, “it took about six months to convince the first big sports agency to give it a shot,” Mr. Steelberg said of the Brand Affinity model, which charges the advertisers service fees for each individual campaign.

Among the agencies whose clients are taking part in the Brand Affinity Web site, in addition to Encore, is Athletes First, which represents about 70 active National Football League players as well as coaches and broadcasters.

“Football is a different beast” from most other sports, said Justin Schulman, vice president for operations at Athletes First, because the players “wear helmets; they can walk down the street and not be recognized.”

Brand Affinity “lets us help take the helmet off,” he added. Among the agency’s players getting deals through Brand Affinity are Mr. Jacobs, running back for the Giants; Thomas Howard, linebacker for the Oakland Raiders; Carson Palmer, quarterback for the Cincinnati Bengals; and John Sullivan, center for the Vikings.

“It’s not traditional for centers and linemen to get marketing opportunities,” Mr. Schulman said. “This exposes more players to marketers at a minimal time commitment to the athlete.” The players typically spend 20 to 30 minutes being photographed for Brand Affinity and providing audio and video clips, which are archived on the Web site and can be used numerous times.

Likewise, “for the advertisers it’s not a huge commitment,” Mr. Schulman said, gaining access to one or more athletes “without forking over a huge, six-figure check.”

In addition to athletes, Brand Affinity matches marketers with actors and other celebrities. Mr. Steelberg said he may expand into the realm of musicians and bands.

Perhaps the Fifth Dimension could be signed for a timely deal: offering for commercial use the 1967 hit song “Up, Up and Away (In My Beautiful Balloon).”

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