

Dwyane Wade's sponsors aren't perturbed by a scandal

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The Miami Heat starter Dwyane Wade, foreground, and the former player Charles Barkley in a new T-Mobile commercial.

He's a young, popular sports star with Florida ties, with endorsements ranging from Gatorade to cellphones, who had a seemingly perfect family — wife, two children — before ugly accusations about an affair grabbed headlines.

The Miami Heat star Dwyane Wade is no Tiger Woods. But his squeaky-clean image also got smudged this year — his by a messy divorce that was quite public.

So his case makes for an interesting study in reputation management. During Mr. Wade's public problems, he stayed in touch with sponsors and fought back against his wife's accusations. His career today is hot — he's one of the National Basketball Association's leading scorers — and so is his endorsement potential. Starting Thursday, he stars in a new round of N.B.A.-centric commercials for T-Mobile, part of a long-running and popular campaign featuring him and the former player Charles Barkley doing some verbal jousting. Mr. Wade also has deals with Pepperidge Farm goldfish crackers, Nike's Jordan brand and Gatorade.

"I've dealt with my own personal issues, and my sponsors have been on board with me the whole time," Mr. Wade said in an interview. "They understand that we're in the limelight and there are some things that are going to come up to be negative, some positive."

And while some stars fall, some have tussles just like regular people do — and for the most part, as long as consumers support them, so will their sponsors.

"Any time that you associate with high-profile talent there are risks," said Mike Belcher, T-Mobile USA's vice president for brand communications marketing. After Mr. Woods's problems, "clearly there's a heightened awareness."

On Thursday, T-Mobile begins showing a commercial that stars Mr. Wade and Mr. Barkley. Created by Publicis in the West, part of the Publicis Groupe, it is part of a long-running campaign showing the two athletes taking good-natured jabs at each other. Another iteration with Mr. Barkley and the Orlando Magic star Dwight Howard will begin running on Christmas Day.

Mr. Howard's ad focuses on fitness, showing him playing with myTouch apps like a calorie counter and yoga-pose generator while Mr. Barkley snoozes in a reclining armchair.

Mr. Wade's ad is about fashion. He stands on a basketball court, nattily dressed in a bow tie and blazer, showing off his myTouch 3G phone and striking poses for the camera. He scrolls through an app that stores pictures of his clothes, which he combines into different styles —

Wall Street, South Beach cool, intellectual. In the background, Mr. Barkley, swinging a golf club, ribs him and calls for the fashion police.

"In this ad, because it's about my fashion, they just kind of wanted me to get in front of the camera, what do I do when I was in front of a mirror if I had just gotten dressed," Mr. Wade said. "When you think you're looking sharp or it's one of your good days, you get in front of the mirror, start posing."

T-Mobile's relationship with Mr. Wade began after it became an official N.B.A. sponsor in 2005. This meant it could pick and choose from among the league's marketing programs. T-Mobile also asked the N.B.A. for some suggestions on which players it should sign up.

"They kind of looked at their audience, and they said, we're young, but we need to get a little bit more hip and cool and relevant," said Mark Tatum, the N.B.A.'s executive vice president for marketing partnerships. "Four years ago, there's this young guy named Dwyane Wade who we knew in the basketball circle was up and coming and a rising star."

T-Mobile also has used celebrities like Avril Lavigne, Chevy Chase and Whoopi Goldberg to add sparkle to their ads.

"It really kind of elevates the stature of the device and breaks through the clutter of the other advertising," Mr. Belcher said.

Of course, when it aligns itself with a celebrity, a brand has to be ready if the celebrity has public troubles. Earlier this year, Mr. Wade's reputation got a bit battered. Mr. Wade and his wife had begun divorce proceedings in 2007. In January, Siobhainn Wade made allegations including that Mr. Wade had had an affair and that he was a poor father. Then, Mr. Wade sued her and her lawyers for defamation over certain claims she had made and then withdrawn. The divorce proceedings continue.

"Anybody can make allegations, and to prove those allegations are another thing, and in my opinion those allegations will not and cannot be proven," said James B. Pritikin, a lawyer for Mr. Wade. "He's a wonderful, wonderful parent. He's made incredible efforts to maintain relationships with his children."

Lawyers for Ms. Wade did not respond to requests for comment.

Mr. Belcher of T-Mobile said that Mr. Wade had been straightforward with him throughout. "He'd been an outstanding partner and very upfront with us," Mr. Belcher said.

And because consumers did not seem too concerned, he was not too concerned. "That's his personal life," he said. "We watch it very carefully in terms of what our consumers are saying, if they're saying anything."

Paul Williams, senior intellectual property consultant for Davie-Brown Entertainment, part of the Omnicom Group, said he did not expect to see a big decline in celebrity endorsements, despite sponsors' renewed examination of their lives.

"Clearly athletes and celebrities are human just like everybody else," he said.

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