

Brand Tiger Woods

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This weekend, the people at Nike and Tag Heuer are presumably very happy. After all, the photographs seen around the world this week have been of their man, Tiger Woods, at the Masters, wearing his Nike cap and shirt and Tag Heuer wristwatch. Steadfastly standing by their endorsee while other sponsors such as Accenture and AT&T sidled away after news of Woods' marital misbehaviour broke at the end of last year, Nike et al are once again front and centre in the golf world, as the fallen superstar returns to the course.

They are clearly betting that their loyalty will pay off, literally – that Woods' talent (and need to prove himself) will trump any trace of moral ambiguity, driving weekend players into golf shops to try, once again, to dress like Tiger, in the hope it will help them to birdie like him. They are betting, in other words, on a certain kind of consumer psychology.

But I wonder if it's really that simple, because such a bet depends on two assumptions: (1) that Tiger's fall from grace has made him less attractive as a front man; and (2) that it will change because if he wins, everyone will forget about his faux pas. All of which is general marketing wisdom. The problem is, I'm not convinced it holds true anymore.

Certainly, the idea that we attempt to imitate other people's success by dressing like them is at the core of many fashion sales strategies. Just consider the truism that if you want to be the boss you should dress like the boss – or the even more straightforward rationale behind the online fashion website asos.com, its name derived from the acronym for As Seen On Screen. It's why brands sign up "ambassadors" such as Chanel's socialite stylist Caroline Sieber and Christian Dior's Charlize Theron, and why every fashion journalist is inundated with press releases the day after an awards show, announcing which celebrity wore which brand. Forests of glossy paper have been sold on the basis of providing information on what famous people are wearing, so those who want to be famous too can dress like their idols.

But increasingly, the concept of being "famous" – or even "successful" – is losing its moral dimension and becoming synonymous with "notorious"; all seem to be defined as "with a recognisable name".

Think about it. Last year Levi Johnston (Sarah Palin's ex-not-quite-son-in-law) starred in an advertisement for pistachios; Paris Hilton shilled for hamburger chain Carl's Jr. Katie Price moves novels, and multiple Pop Idol contestants have had their spokesperson moments. None of these is necessarily an individual that others want to emulate (at least I hope not), yet their notoriety somehow elevates them into the realm of what sociologists would call "influencers." Which makes me wonder if it's their humanity – their fallibility, their naked desire for their 15 minutes of fame – that constitutes their attraction; that, in fact, it's precisely their non-superiority that makes them effective sales agents.

Put another way, as much as we like our superstars and want to emulate them superficially, we also like people to whom we can relate – or even feel superior – internally. This is, after all, the basis of reality TV, which pretty much trumps what I consider the best written and acted shows (24, Glee, House) in the ratings every time. Watching C-list celebrities eat bugs in the jungle has the obsessive appeal of a train wreck. It's not reverse psychology so much as absolutism psychology: selling an experience that makes you glad you are you, as opposed to selling a product that makes you a better you. And its efficacy should not be underestimated – nor the implication that perhaps it was a mistake for the Woods' team to doubt him during his period as a "tarnished champion", "scandal-fatigued golfer" and whatever else they called him when the hoo-ha started. The publicity boost he experienced might, in fact, have worked to their own ends (the double entendres associated with various tag lines taking on a life of their

own via the web and keeping his name very much in the public eye, while he himself was out of it). And it would be a corresponding mistake to assume a giant uptick in sales afterwards. Because maybe what has been going on over the last few months, in stores if not on the green, is, rather, par for the course. All puns intended.

In fact, the revelation of Woods' human foibles may have been a good thing, not just for the man himself but for his sponsors. Previously, for every sports fan who desired a Gillette razor because an automaton-like golfer used it, perhaps there was another who thought his malcoordination made the chance of nicks just too great. Since last December, of course, when it was revealed that Woods himself is far less than perfect, such a fear would be less of an issue.

Sports gods are one thing, after all, but how much more accessible is a sports god whose feet of clay we can mould in our own image?

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