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Sponsorship: Taking a

Celebrity athlete sponsorships are often overlooked by community banks out of concern that they are too challenging or costly. However, Norway Savings Bank in Maine found that a relationship with an Olympic gold medalist offered benefits that overshadowed the risks.

BY KAREN HAKALA, CFMP

EVERY DAY PHONES RING IN BANK MARKETING DEPARTMENTS with callers asking for donations and sponsorships for local charities and fundraising events. But it's not every day that an agent representing a world-class athlete and Olympic champion calls a small community bank.

That's what happened at Norway Saving Bank, Norway, Maine, in October 2009. Celebrity athlete sponsorships offer a unique marketing opportunity. Banks looking for positive media exposure to position and brand themselves, or to reach and attract Gen Y, can help accomplish these goals by sponsoring a celebrity athlete—provided that the celebrity athlete is the right fit for the bank.

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Daring Leap



Seth Wescott of Maine on his way to winning the Gold Medal in the Mens Snowboard Cross Final on Feb.16, 2006, at the Turin Winter Olympic Games in Bardonecchia, Italy.

Brand alignment

The management at Norway Savings knew the day they met Seth Wescott that he was the right person to represent the bank. Wescott is a Maine-based professional snowboarder who is a two-time Olympic champion in the snowboard cross. (In snowboard cross, a group of snowboarders start simultaneously atop an inclined course and then race to the finish line.)

Before bank managers entered into a two-year sponsorship agreement and partnership with Wescott, they assessed risks and developed a marketing strategy as to how the athlete's image would be used to enhance the bank's brand positioning.

Norway's franchise is located in southern and western Maine—with 20 branches bordering the Atlantic coastline and nestled in the heart of ski country. With \$945 million in assets, the bank competes with three large national banks and 14 regional and community banks. In 2006, Norway launched a combined cultural/rebranding initiative with the goal of building an achievement and support culture as well as a new, differentiated brand.

Celebrity athlete sponsorships offer a unique marketing opportunity.

How a Kentucky Community Bank Became the 'Official Bank of UK Athletics'

When the media rights for athletics at the University of Kentucky (UK) became available, the Central Bank & Trust Co. (assets: \$1.6 billion), Lexington, Ky., immediately talked with IMG, the sports marketing company that administers the contract.

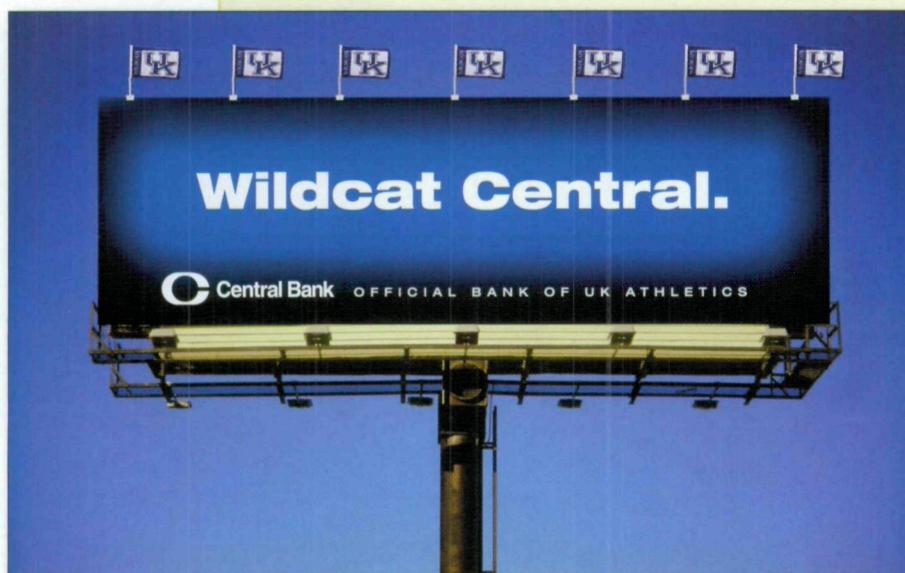
bank's brand with UK Athletics' brand. Bank managers, the board of directors and the bank's advertising agency, Doe Anderson in Louisville, all agreed that it was a unique opportunity that would allow the bank to leapfrog the competition. A second reason was that the bank was interested

in building its market share among young college graduates who have chosen to live in the urban markets around the bank's major markets. "We feel that sports marketing gives us a highly impactful means to attract and develop them as customers and advocates," notes Kelly.

The bank signed a five-year agreement, believing that the largest benefit would be long-term branding and market share advances created by the loyalty effect of one of college athletics' most devoted fan bases.

Lesley Wright, the bank's communications specialist, has worked with the bank's advertising agency to develop TV and radio campaigns featuring UK Head Football Coach Joker Phillips and Men's Head Basketball Coach John Calipari. (Last year the bank also used former Head Football Coach, Rich Brooks, who has since retired.)

In addition, UK Men's Basketball Coach, John Calipari, has spoken to the bank's staff at its annual 2010 Sales & Service Rally and has hosted a tour of the basketball practice facility and reception for a select group of customers. The bank also has taken groups of customers to attend Coach Cal's live radio show, which is done in Lexington. These types of events give the guests a chance to meet the coach and to gain an inside view of the team and his coaching style. The endorsement agreement also covers UK Women's Basketball Coach Matthew Mitchell and Baseball Coach Gary Henderson and events with them



An outdoor billboard promoting Central Bank's sponsorship of athletics at the University of Kentucky (UK).

When the bank was awarded the bid in April 2009, the bank chose the phrase, "Official Bank of UK Athletics," to describe the association. "We felt this 'brand' statement carried more impact than other terms that could be used to describe the agreement," says Stephen C. Kelly, executive vice president, marketing and sales.

The decision to accept the sponsorship was based largely on the branding impact that would come from linking the

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The effort to change the bank's culture took place under the direction of an organizational development company. The goal was to evolve from the bank's previous "top-down management power and role" culture. Instead, employees wanted to create a new culture that fostered personal achievement—in balance with teamwork support—that also empowered employees to make their own decisions.

The rebranding effort was started when the bank's market research firm conducted a consumer awareness study to help the bank's marketing agency build strategies to position and rebrand Norway Savings.

Several years later as a result of these dual efforts, the bank

was recognized both for its cultural and rebranding efforts. In 2008, it was cited as the number one Best Place to Work in Maine in the large company category by the Maine State Council of the Society for Human Resource Management. In September 2009, the bank was cited as the "Overall Winner" at the ABA Financial Marketing Awards for the bank's "Colorful Solutions" brand campaign.

Two Maine-based brands

Why did Seth Wescott's agent telephone Norway Savings to pursue a sponsorship? The answer was simple. The international sports marketing company Octagon Olympic & Ac-

are being planned.

One significant aspect of the sponsorship is that the coaches also are bank customers who can speak from experience about the benefits of the services featured in the ads.

Among other things, the agreement provided that the bank is the exclusive sponsor of the media backdrops that are shown behind the coaches at all UK Athletics news conferences. There are approximately 150 news conferences per year that are covered by all the TV stations in Kentucky. Some of these news conferences also air on ESPN, CBS and ABC, providing national coverage for the bank's brand.

To monitor the success of the agreement, the

bank calculates the volume of new accounts opened by the products endorsed and the growth in market share that occurs since the agreement was signed. "We believe our UK Athletics Sponsorship has been a significant factor in our bank's growth to second place (up from fourth the year before) among all community banks chartered in Kentucky," explains Kelly.

Kelly believes that celebrity sponsorship arrangements are an effective means of separating a bank's brand from competitors. However, he notes that it is very important to structure the agreement to protect the bank.

Central Bank chose only those sponsorship elements that it believes have the most value for it. The bank also monitors and discusses the sponsorship's performance weekly to ensure it stays up to date with new developments.

"It has been our experience that we must increase sports-marketing spend by an amount that is at least equal to the direct cost of the sponsorship if we are going to be successful in creating the awareness, product sales and market share gains we desire," Kelly adds.

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A print ad for Bleed Blue Checking, Central Bank's special checking account developed for its sponsorship of athletics at the University of Kentucky (UK).

A sample print ad used by Central Bank & Trust Co. (assets: \$1.6 billion), Lexington, Ky., to promote its sponsorship of athletics at the University of Kentucky (UK).

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tion Sports represented Seth Wescott. In general, the sports agency seeks sponsors to support its athletes financially, but an important part of the arrangement is to find a sponsor that is a good “fit” for the athlete and will support the athlete’s personal brand. The agent was searching for a Maine-based bank that might be a good match for Wescott.

Why was Wescott a good fit for the Norway brand? Wescott grew up in Maine and began snowboarding at the age of seven. Today he is a co-owner of a pub and restaurant at the base of Sugarloaf—his home mountain in Carrabasset Valley. More notably, he is one of the most accomplished and decorated athletes in snowboarding history, having reached the podium in every major snowboard cross event in the world. In his Olympic debut at the 2006 Winter Olympics in Torino, Italy, Wescott won the gold in the snowboard cross as the first Olympic champion in the event. Sponsorships from Visa, Sprint, Bolle and Chevy Trucks of New England provide the financial support for Wescott to continue his childhood dream of being a professional athlete.

Vetting athletes

Bank marketers are accustomed to completing risk assessments before launching new products and initiatives to identify potential financial, operational and reputation risks. For the financial assessment in this case, Octagon provided Norway with several sponsorship options that were added to the bank’s marketing budget. Like other marketing campaigns and initiatives that Norway Savings invests in, the bank monitors results to determine whether the benefits justify the costs.

Knowing that celebrity spokespeople can sometimes present public relations challenges, a la Tiger Woods, bank managers considered possible reputation risks and decided that when and if something happens, they would evaluate where they are in their marketing campaign and make decisions to stay with it or to pull it.

Before signing an agreement, members of Norway’s management team met with Wescott, who at the time was training to compete in the 2010 Winter Olympic Games in Vancouver, Canada. They quickly discovered similarities and synergies: both are Maine-based and share similar values and goals. The managers figured that these similarities were key ingredients for building not only a solid partnership and relationship, but an authentic fit for branding. Like Norway Savings, Wescott is an active member of the community and he expresses his appreciation for community support by giving back whenever he can. As an ambassador for “Take it Outside,” a statewide initiative to encourage Maine’s children and families to reconnect with nature, Wescott also serves as a spokesperson for “WinterKids,” a program established to encourage and help young people be active and enjoy all that winter sports in the state have to offer.

Other unknown and uncontrollable risks associated with sponsoring professional athletes include potential injuries and performance lapses. Norway entered into a two-year agreement to sponsor Wescott not knowing the pending outcome of the 2010 Winter Olympics. The bank’s commitment to take the risk paid off, and Wescott expressed his appreciation for his new sponsor by surprising employees at their annual banquet—the

week prior to heading to Vancouver, where he defended his title and won his second gold medal!

Brand champions

Within the week that Wescott won the gold at Vancouver, his image appeared on Wheaties boxes and grocery store shelves throughout the country. On a similar level, bank marketers love to see their bank’s logo-wear proudly worn by employees and they continuously seek opportunities to tag their icon on sponsored surfaces and advertisements. As part of Norway’s sponsorship agreement, Wescott agrees to provide Norway Savings branding on his helmets, snowboards, and he also wears his sponsor logo-wear at public relations and media events and interviews.

These opportunities provide Norway with continued high-profile brand exposure to consumers and the media through internationally televised events like World Cups, Olympics, X-Games and the multitude of media interviews that he conducts.

Upon his return from Vancouver (and appearances on Comedy Central’s Colbert Report and NBC’s Today Show where he was hugged by Matt Lauer),

Norway entered into a two-year agreement to sponsor Wescott not knowing the pending outcome of the 2010 Winter Olympics.



After winning a gold medal in the snowboard cross event at the 2010 Winter Olympics at Vancouver, Canada, Seth Wescott returned to Maine for a “Welcome Home Tour,” which was cosponsored by Norway Savings Bank.

Shown here during the tour were, from left, Bob Harmon, president and CEO of Norway Savings; Seth Wescott and Karen Hakala, CFMP, senior vice president, Norway Savings. Photo credit: Octagon.



Views of the "Ride and Decide" contest microsite that Norway Savings Bank developed to enhance Gen Y awareness of the bank brand. The microsite featured five snowboard designs created by a custom snowboard company based in Portland, Maine. Visitors were encouraged to vote on their favorite design for a planned Seth Wescott tribute snowboard.



Norway Savings co-hosted a Welcome Home Tour with Sugarloaf to honor Wescott. The two-day media event attracted thousands of fans and resulted in statewide and national media coverage. This is an example of how Seth's agent, Octagon, has been successful at leveraging the media's interest and attention in the firm's athletes and directing it to their sponsors. The Welcome Home Tour started at Sugarloaf, Maine, and took Seth and the Norway Savings brand across the country to four more locations along with his other national sponsors.

Also, through their partnership, Norway has name, image and likeness rights to Wescott for use in all marketing, advertising and promotional materials. Similar to typical advertising compliance review, Wescott's agent requires approval rights on any materials involving the athlete to protect both Wescott and the bank as it relates to the athlete's other sponsors and the Olympic compliance.

Since Norway Savings is not an official Olympic sponsor, it does not have the right to use any official Olympic marks (the five rings for example). Oddly enough, Wescott also doesn't have the right to use Olympic marks either unless it is a biographical reference.

During their first year, Norway has featured Wescott in everything from television, radio and newspaper ads, to in-branch and online website, Facebook and YouTube promotions. In January 2010, Norway launched a multimedia campaign that consisted of television and radio image ads featuring Wescott in conjunction with a checking account acquisition campaign. A four-color double-truck newspaper spread (one featuring Wescott; the other featured the product promotion) appeared in local daily and weekly newspapers in the bank's market for five weeks. Net result for new checking accounts (lift from previous year during same time period) was 26 percent.

Like Norway Savings, Wescott is an active member of the community and expresses his appreciation by giving back whenever he can.

Cheering fans—and 'likes' online

With the production help from Octagon, Norway created a series of digital video "webisodes" the bank has posted on its YouTube channel that feature Seth at Norway Savings events and the behind-the-scenes production of a television commercial filmed on the slopes at Sugarloaf. The idea behind the videos is to create some situations that are both natural to Seth (like snowboarding at Sugarloaf) but also scenarios that are tied directly to the bank's products and services. One bank theme in the videos is the idea that Wescott, as a professional athlete who travels the world, banks with a local bank—and he has the capability of doing this because of Norway Savings' Internet and soon to be launched mobile banking technology.

Building on the theory that the best channel to reach Gen Y is online—and followers and fans of Wescott fit the Gen Y profile—Norway utilized the services of Pannos-Winzeler Marketing, Bedford, N.H., to create and launch a Facebook

Views of a intercity bus "wraparound" advertisement featuring Norway Savings and Seth Wescott.



page, Youtube channel and consumer contest microsite. The contest microsite "decideandride.com" featured five snowboard designs created by TeamEight, a custom snowboard company based in Portland, Maine. Close to 600 hundred people voted on their favorite Seth Wescott tribute snowboard design and hundreds of messages were posted to the site.

Building a winning relationship

The bank believes that the publicity associated with Seth

Wescott and the sponsorship from Norway Savings helps create brand awareness for the bank. It also creates exposure and drives consumer traffic to Norway Savings Bank.

What advice would I give to other banks that are thinking of entering into a sponsorship relationship with a celebrity athlete? Before entering into a sponsorship, banks should first evaluate whether the celebrity is a good fit and will represent the bank with an authentic image and message. If the use of a celebrity genuinely supports the bank's marketing goals and reinforces brand positioning, a partnership makes sense.

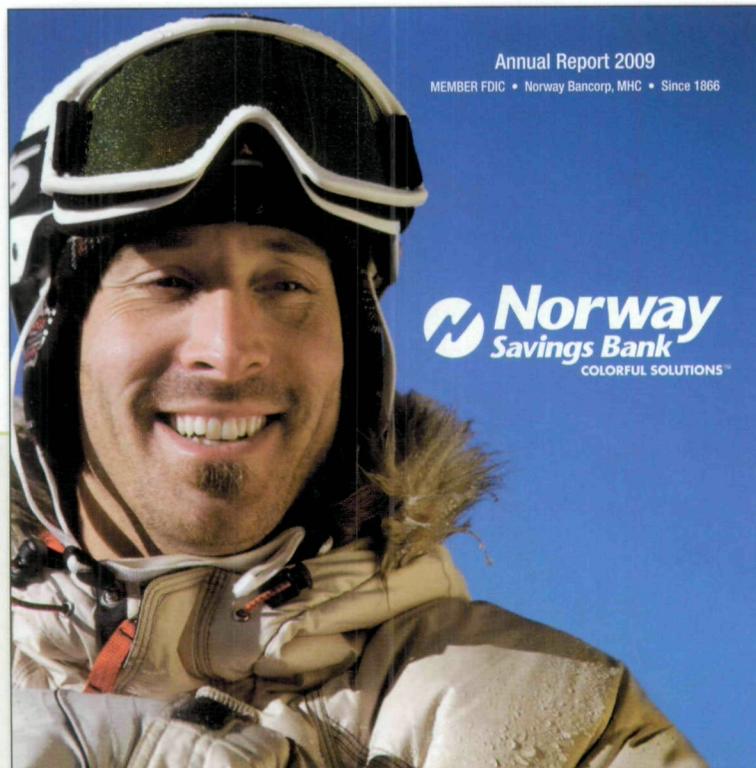
The bank views its sponsorship opportunity with Seth Wescott as more than a partnership—it sees this as a *relationship*. And it's not all about the Norway Savings brand. It's not a one-way street. As a sponsor, in addition to financial support, the bank has the responsibility to provide high-quality imaging and advertising that supports Seth Wescott's brand.

The bank believes that consumers evaluate businesses by the quality of their advertisements and will quite often make decisions because they want to associate themselves with a brand that speaks to them.

Norway is expecting a huge following of snowboarders in the years to come! ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Seth Wescott's photo dominated the cover of the 2009 annual report from Norway Savings Bank.

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