

## **The Use Of Celebrity Athletes As Endorsers: Views Of The New Zealand General Public**

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### **Abstract**

New Zealand companies have a long history of using professional athletes as endorsers in their promotional campaigns. Celebrity endorsement literature suggests transfer of positive image between the celebrity/athlete and product, service or cause endorsed.

The purpose of this research was to assist sport marketing managers and advertising agencies in matching athletes with products. Following on from athlete endorsement research conducted with tertiary education students (Garland and Ferkins, 2003), the views of the New Zealand general public relative to athlete endorsement were solicited. Ohanian's (1990) 15 item source-credibility scale and the constant-sum scale were used to measure potential 'endorsement fit' for four New Zealand sporting personalities: Bernice Mene (retired captain - national netball team); Sarah Ulmer (2004 Olympic Gold Medallist, cycling); Justin Marshall (All Black rugby – most capped halfback); and Stephen Fleming (captain, national cricket team). The Ohanian scale was used to test each athlete's credibility as endorser of a sports drink, with the constant sum scale used to test their 'endorsement fit' for a sports drink, bottled water, deodorant, honey and a bank account.

Overall, the female athletes scored best on both scales and for all products except the bank account, making them good 'all rounders' for product endorsements. Stephen Fleming and Bernice Mene, both team captains received comparable scores for endorsement of bank accounts, suggesting perhaps a general public perception of their leadership and authority.

Keywords: athlete, endorsement, advertising

### **Celebrity and Celebrity Athlete Endorsement**

Celebrity and celebrity athlete endorsements have long attracted the interest of practitioners, students and researchers (Brooks and Harris, 1998). For this paper, a celebrity athlete endorser is a publicly recognised sports star who uses that public recognition to help another (usually a corporate client) sell or bolster the image of specific goods and services.

Celebrities and celebrity athletes provide benefits that unknown endorsers cannot. Celebrities 'cut through' advertising clutter, hold viewer attention (Charbonneau and Garland, 2005) and transfer positive qualities such as physical attractiveness and likeability to the brand (Ohanian, 1990). They contribute to brand name recognition/recall and assist in the development of credible, distinct brand personalities (Erdogan and Kitchen, 1998). Athletes provide particularly compelling endorsements for products that have contributed to their sporting performance and success (Dyson and Turco, 1997; Stone, Joseph and Jones, 2003).

However, with these benefits come risks. Increased celebrity attention may lead to brand overshadowing (Erdogan and Kitchen, 1998). Controversy involving the endorser can lead to corporate embarrassment and transfer of negative attitudes to the brand. (Till, 2001;

Pornpitakpan, 2003). Celebrities endorsing multiple products risk overexposure, lessening the impact and distinctiveness of each product relationship as well as diminishing consumer perceptions of celebrity credibility and likeability (James and Ryan, 2001; Garland and Ferkins 2003). Celebrity athletes always face the risk of injury, which would reduce visibility and performance and thereby endorsement potential (Irwin, Sutton and McCarthy, 2002).

While there are inherent risks, the widespread continued practice of using celebrities and celebrity athletes signals that marketers believe the risks are worth taking (Dyson and Turco, 1998) “even though research findings are equivocal about the ability of celebrities to stimulate actual purchase behaviour” (Erdogan and Kitchen 1998, p. 17).

Much research effort has focused on developing selection criteria; however there is little agreement as to most the significant dimensions (Erdogan, 1999). The Source Credibility Model suggests message effectiveness depends on endorser perceived credibility (Ohanian, 1990, 1991; Shank, 2005). According to the Source Attractiveness Model, message effectiveness depends on similarity, likeability and familiarity between source and receiver (Shank, 2005). According to the Product Match-up Hypothesis, effective advertising results when the messages conveyed by celebrity image are compatible with product image (Pornpitakpan, 2003). The Meaning Transfer Model maintains that the cultural meanings celebrity endorsers possess such as status and lifestyle, transfer to products endorsed (McCracken, 1989).

Considerable attention has been paid to the consumer side with comparatively little attention paid to criteria practitioners actually use to make endorsement decisions. Four main studies have explored advertising practitioners’ perspectives towards celebrity endorsements in the United States, the United Kingdom and New Zealand - Miciak and Shanklin (1994); Erdogan and Baker (1999/2000); Erdogan, Baker and Tagg (2001); Charbonneau and Garland (2005), with only the latter specifically investigating celebrity athlete endorsers. The results of the four studies showed that while a similar list of factors were considered, the priority given to each was dependent on specific campaign objectives. In the latest study, advertising practitioners placed higher importance on risk of negative publicity and hiring costs, in contrast to much of the consumer literature which placed higher importance on credibility and trustworthiness. Common to all four studies is the importance of celebrity-audience and celebrity-product match-up.

### **Objective and Methodology**

Ohanian’s 1990 15-item source-credibility scale incorporates two themes from the existing literature (see Figure 1): source credibility (expertise and trustworthiness) and source attractiveness (familiarity, likeability, similarity).

**Figure 1: Ohanian (1990) Source Credibility Scale**

<b>Attractiveness</b>	<b>Trustworthiness</b>	<b>Expertise</b>
Unattractive-Attractive	Undependable – Dependable	Not an expert - Expert
Not classy – Classy	Dishonest – Honest	Inexperienced - experienced
Ugly – Beautiful	Unreliable – Reliable	Un - Knowledgeable
Plain – Elegant	Insincere – Sincere	Unqualified - Qualified
Not sexy – Sexy	Untrustworthy – Trustworthy	Unskilled - Skilled

In a pilot study, Garland and Ferkins (2003) investigated the reliability and validity (via confirmatory factor analysis) of Ohanian's scale for 'endorsement fit' using New Zealand tertiary education students. The objective of this current research was to test the usefulness of the Ohanian scale, which had performed well with students, in assessing 'endorsement fit' with the New Zealand general public.

A mail survey was conducted in New Zealand in May 2004, with participants randomly selected from the New Zealand electoral roll. One reminder was sent. The final sample of 392 adult New Zealanders represented a 46% response rate, with sampling error of 4.9% at 95% confidence. The sample was 57% female and 43% male with the age breakdown relatively aligned with the New Zealand 18 years+ population parameters (7% <25; 36% 25 – 44; 37% 45 – 64; 20% 65+).

Respondents were asked basic demographic information as well as familiarity with each athlete and interest in, participation, and purchase of merchandise for the sport played by each of the four celebrity athletes (Mene – netball; Ulmer – cycling; Marshall – rugby; Fleming – cricket). These particular athletes were selected from a large number of New Zealand celebrity athletes during two focus groups held earlier in the year.

The four celebrity athletes were assessed using the Ohanian (1990) semantic differential scale (Figure 1) as potential endorsers of an unbranded sports drink. The same athletes were then assessed using the constant-sum scale as potential endorsers of a number of unbranded products.

## **Results and Discussion**

The survey was conducted in May 2004, prior to the Olympics and the All Blacks 2004 campaign but during the Super 12 rugby competition and Black Caps cricket tour to England. Given Ulmer's Olympic medal and Marshall's All Black performance, their scores may have been higher if the survey had been conducted later in the year.

### **Respondents' Involvement in Celebrity Athletes' Sports**

Overall, respondents were reasonably familiar with each of the athletes selected (see Table 1). While Bernice Mene is the only retired athlete however she remains in the public eye as a spokesperson for health issues. Interest in the particular sport of the celebrity athlete roughly follows the overall popularity of the sport amongst New Zealanders, with rugby being most popular and cycling least popular. Survey respondents were watchers rather than players/administrators of each sport and low purchasers of each sport's merchandise, other than rugby.

**Table 1: Involvement in Celebrity Athletes' Sports**

	<b>Familiarity – Athlete (%)</b>	<b>Interest in Sport (%)</b>	<b>Participation in Sport (%)</b>	<b>Merchandise Purchase (%)</b>
<b>Bernice Mene</b>	89	23	7	7
<b>Justin Marshall</b>	81	44	6	22
<b>Sarah Ulmer</b>	82	7	4	4
<b>Stephen Fleming</b>	81	31	8	8

## Endorsement of Unbranded Sports Drink – Ohanian Scale Results

Bernice Mene is clearly the celebrity athlete most preferred for endorsing an unbranded sports drink, with Sarah Ulmer a close second (see Table 2). While Mene was second to Ulmer on the *Attractiveness* dimension, her ratings on the *Trustworthiness* dimension clinched her overall “best fit” position. The females outperformed the males in terms of attractiveness. Mene was perceived as most trustworthy overall, with Marshall being least so. Not surprisingly, all athletes were judged as experts relative to endorsing a sports drink.

Grouping attributes under dimensions and deriving group means as well as an overall global mean can be controversial. It assumes each attribute has a unitary value that may not always be the case. Nonetheless, the distances between the means for each athlete on each dimension would suggest that there are real differences in the perceptions of respondents as to which in which athletes is the “best fit” for endorsing an unbranded sports drink. The message for marketers and advertisers – seriously consider the females!

**Table 2: Endorsement of Unbranded Sport Drink**

Ohanian (1990) Dimensions (a)	Bernice Mene	Justin Marshall	Sarah Ulmer	Stephen Fleming
Sample Size	(392)	(388)	(391)	(389)
Attractiveness	<u>25.3</u> *	21.3	<u>25.6</u> *	23.2
Trustworthiness	<u>29.9</u> *	25.8	28.3	28.1
Expertise	26.4	25.1	27.0	26.0
Grand Mean (total)	<u>81.6</u> * <u>27.2</u> *	72.2 24.1	<u>80.9</u> * <u>27.0</u> *	77.3 25.8

(a) each dimension made up of 5 attributes on 7 point semantic differential scale

\* ANOVA results (95% confidence on 2 tailed test)

## Endorsement of Products – Constant-sum Results

Each product tested was selected for a specific reason. The sport drink was selected for its obvious sporting link and use by celebrity athletes. Deodorant was selected as it is a personal branded product that often uses athlete endorsers in promotional campaigns. The bank account, as a service, was included to test for authority and leadership beyond athletic prowess. Bottled water and honey represented gender neutral products.

As can be seen by Table 3, when athletes are evaluated relative to each other, Sarah Ulmer was seen by respondents as the best fit as endorser for both the unbranded sports drink and bottled water. Bernice Mene and Stephen Fleming, both team captains, were judged the best

fit as endorsers for a bank account, suggesting spillover from their on-field leadership. Mene appears a better fit for deodorant with either of the female athletes a good fit for honey.

**Table 3: Constant-sum Scale Results**

	<b>Sport Drink (%)</b>	<b>Bottled Water (%)</b>	<b>Deodorant (%)</b>	<b>Honey (%)</b>	<b>Bank Account (%)</b>
Sample size	(326)	(333)	(331)	(333)	(332)
<b>Bernice Mene</b>	27	27	29	<u>31*</u>	<u>28*</u>
<b>Justin Marshall</b>	26	25	23	19	23
<b>Sarah Ulmer</b>	<u>30*</u>	<u>31*</u>	27	<u>30*</u>	23
<b>Stephen Fleming</b>	23	23	26	20	<u>29*</u>
Total	100	100	100	100	100

\* ANOVA results (95% confidence on 2 tailed test)

Considering the Ohanian source credibility results in conjunction with those generated by the constant-sum scale allows advertisers to ‘position’ celebrity athletes to better advantage.

### **Limitations and Conclusion**

Due to copyright issues and cost factors, descriptions of celebrity athletes were used rather than photographs, perhaps explaining the 20% non-awareness. The products selected were gender neutral, however, results may be different if gender specific products were tested. Whatever scale is used, benefits must be balanced with limitations. For example, Ohanian’s scale is American derived and validated, raising the perennial question of cross-cultural applicability and has the further issue of assumption of equal influence per attribute discussed earlier.

Despite these limitations, in this survey the female athletes, Mene and Ulmer, outperformed their male counterparts, Marshall and Fleming, coming through as particularly good ‘all rounders’ for product endorsement. The multi item approach provided by the Ohanian scale results provides advertising agencies with insight into ‘how’ to present these celebrity athletes. For example, an advertisement featuring Bernice Mene would be well advised to capitalise on her trustworthiness.

What this research shows is that scales such as the Ohanian and constant-sum can be useful testing instruments for advertising practitioners when evaluating a range of athletes for selection as potential endorsers.

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