

How to brand hockey players even when they're locked out

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Martin Brodeur, Joe Thornton and Rick Nash are all business on the ice at the world hockey championship in Innsbruck, Austria. But when Canada's No. 1 goalie and two of its best forwards take a breather, marketing expert Brad Robins wants them to be thinking of business off the ice as well.

The trio are clients of the high-energy Robins, who advises athletes on how to get maximum marketing mileage out of their sports accomplishments.

Hockey players represent a particular challenge, because they lack the profile of basketball, football or baseball stars and the marketability of golfers, tennis players and NASCAR drivers. Apart from the remarkable Wayne Gretzky, the king of sports retirees when it comes to endorsement income, few hockey people have national stature even in Canada. The fact that there was no 2004-05 National Hockey League season to showcase players' talents just makes a tough task all the more difficult.

"What I want my clients to start thinking about is how can we attack the norms and where can we zig where everybody else is zagging," Robins said. "My strategy has really been to enhance the individual and what he has to offer to potential sponsors if and when they want to associate with the sport."

Brodeur, one of the few NHL players whose marketing profile has been considerably higher in this non-hockey year than when he toils for the New Jersey Devils, is a case in point.

As he does with all clients, Robins had long conversations with the star goalie to learn more about his personal tastes and habits. He then pitched campaigns to the managers of the appropriate brands, with limited success. The guy drinks four cans of Sprite or 7-Up before every game? Great. Let's contact the marketing people responsible for selling the stuff.

For Nash and Thornton, two poster-boy bachelors who shared a chalet in Davos, Switzerland, where they played hockey this winter, Robins unsuccessfully pitched an idea to have them play host to a MuchMusic television program. The purpose was to boost their profile and to highlight the fact that, at the end of the day, pro athletes are in the entertainment business. The usual response has been: Let's wait until the NHL is back before we make a decision.

Robins understands it's hard to justify tying up ad dollars in an athlete who isn't working at his craft. For all his genuine likeability, Brodeur wins endorsements thanks to his feats in goal in the NHL and on the world stage, not his ability to get his kids ready for school.

"What happens is that when you challenge the norms, you really need somebody [on the corporate side] to see the potential," Robins said. "It's the problem with Canadian marketing in a nutshell. How do we go outside the box?"

But that doesn't mean the athletes' agents and advisers should sit on their hands waiting for the phone that is no longer ringing. "You have to figure out what you can do to create your own branding," Robins said.

For Brodeur, who has the added Canadian advantages of being both bilingual and immensely popular because of his unabashed patriotism and love of the game, that could mean putting his name on clothing, fragrances and other products that would appeal to young males. Indeed, a line of such products, to be known as Martin B, is in the development stage, Robins said.

Some highly-paid athletes regularly turn down marketing opportunities or demand prices so high corporations turn them down. Others are just as disinterested in the extracurricular income, but are willing to endorse products because the exposure feeds their egos.

Some players prefer assignments that dovetail with their interests. Detroit Red Wings captain Steve Yzerman, for instance, talks to business people about such issues as leadership and competitiveness. Still others, such as Toronto Maple Leafs tough guy Tie Domi, who is regarded in the industry as one of the most marketing-savvy of hockey players, are eager to open business doors that will serve them well when their playing careers are over.

Robins brings an extensive background in advertising to his own task. One of his accounts in the early 1980s was Apple Computer, when it was a little-known industry player trying to establish a foothold in Canada. He sees hockey players in a similar light.

"I've got some unbelievable assets. These are fabulous Canadian kids," he said. "Ultimately, Apple worked because it had a great product.

"If you don't have a great product, it doesn't matter what you do [to promote it] People will uncover you."