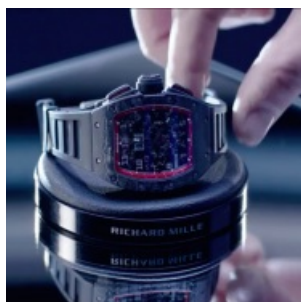


ADVERTISING

## Brand ambassadors must push product carefully, not overtly

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*Image from McLaren/Richard Mille collaboration video*

By FORREST CARDAMENIS

VERSAILLES, France When brands and athletes work together, the content they create must promote the brand primarily in a subtle way, according to a panel at The New York Times International Luxury Conference on April 6.

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When partners and athletes collaborate, the brand is often exposed to sports fans they would not otherwise, but these consumers are interested in watching a favorite athlete, not in advertising. A quieter promotion and other forms of exposure that do not feel like advertising are often the best way for a brand to impress the athlete's base.

"When I entered the watch business, in my opinion it was a bit boring," said Richard Mille, CEO of Richard Mille. "I said to myself, we must turn to the world of sports, lifestyle and art; we have to get out from the ghetto and go to real life."

Adrenaline rush

On "The Power of Sports," Mr. Mille and freestyle skier Kevin Rolland, who won a gold medal at the 2009 Freestyle World Ski Championships and a bronze, discussed the power and nuances of partnerships between the sporting and luxury worlds. For Richard Mille, ambassadors must wear a watch during their competition, be it a tennis match or a Formula 1 race.



*Kevin Rolland, Richard Mille and NYT European Style Correspondant Elizabeth Paton*

Mr. Mille notes that the first time that tennis superstar Rafael Nadal wore one of the brand's watches, in the 2010 French Open, it could have been a disaster if the watch had been hit, cracked and fallen to the ground. However, he has faith in the high quality of his product and knows that an athlete seen wearing a product will create a far more genuine connection than a commercial.

For this reason, the brand has forsaken commercials altogether. The new marketing savvy generation sees brands as self-interested and unreliable sources of information.

Instead, the best way to market the watch as durable is to have it worn in extreme activities, from tennis and polo to auto-racing.

For some sports, finding partners is a necessity. Mr. Rolland said that there is no federation or other source of funding for freestyle skiing. He estimated that 80 percent of his revenue comes from a half dozen sponsors and that only 20 percent is prize money.

When looking for athletes to partner with, brands should consider other sources of funding available for sports in addition to questions of visibility. While an NBA or NFL superstar may be highly visible, other athletes may be more accessible and enthusiastic partners.



*McLaren driver Richard Mille watch*

In addition, athletes do not necessarily like to be pigeonholed. Mr. Rolland says that after five years with an energy drink brand, he left because their image was too closely tied to the extreme sports world. He is now working with a Champagne brand, which could open him to a new audience.

Mr. Rolland also discusses the importance feedback from social media has played. He has found that fans do not want an ad to be like a "commercial"; they want engaging rather than promotional content featuring a favorite athlete. Brands must satiate this desire while slipping in subtle branding elements.

Asked whether the success that Kendall Jenner has had as an Este Lauder ambassador is a sign that successful sponsorships are shifting from athletes to lifestyle celebrities, Mr. Rolland and Mr. Mille both downplayed the significance. While Ms. Jenner has been particularly successful, anyone with a devout gathering of fans can be a successful sponsor as long as the content is right for both parties.



*Kendall Jenner for Este Lauder in Vogue*

"[Consumers] look for something genuine," Mr. Mille said. "They are fed up with the artificial way luxury brands behave today.

"Sports and as I said, the fact that I put my watchers in danger can do that," he said. "I'm not afraid to take this risk and it's a way to get publicity."

#### The right sponsor

Richard Mille is continuing to move forward with athletic partnerships, recently shaking hands with British automaker McLaren on an extended brand partnership.

Richard Mille announced its partnership with the automaker's Formula 1 team on social media the morning of Friday Feb. 18. The exclusivity and rarity of the vehicles, along with a keen sense of design, make the high-priced brands a match ([see story](#)).

Strong celebrity partnerships can lead to significant revenue gains for brands.

Relatedly, Songstress Rihanna has been named the most marketable celebrity, according to research by The NPD Group.

Rihanna topped NPD's ranking with 367 points, due in part because her fan base has distinctive brand preferences, more so than any other celebrity in sectors such as sports, film, music and others. The research conducted by NPD aims to identify the brand preferences of fans to help marketers determine which celebrities consumers are most likely to engage ([see story](#)).