



By Richard D. Czerniawski

A TOWERING EXAMPLE OF OPPOSITIONING

Zion Williamson is a college basketball phenom. Zion, 6'8" and 285-pounds, whom many consider to be the number 1 pick in the NBA 2019 draft, at a towering 6'8" and 285-pounds, has missed playing Duke's last five games due to a sprained knee. The incident occurred in the first minute of play against their great rival, the University of North Carolina, on 20 February. The cause of his injury? His Nike shoe split! Sacre bleu!!



Sketchers jumped at the opportunity to opposition Nike. Oppositioning is positioning the competition in an unflattering light to position your brand in a positive light. Politicians are noted for employing this practice. They highlight their opponents' faults in an attempt to lead voters to perceive the oppositoner as the better choice. Sales personnel often use oppositioning, sometimes (as in the pharmaceutical and medical device sectors) even before a competitive product is launched.

Oppositioning is contrasting. They stink, but we don't! In the case of Sketchers, they claim that unlike Nike, "We won't split on you."



Now, I'm not sure that Sketchers is in the same league as Nike. While they have basketball shoes, they don't have endorsements from NBA stars such as LeBron James, Steph Curry, James Harden or even one of the current crop of Chicago Bull's players (and the team is pitiful). Nor do they have the endorsements of collegiate basketball teams or stars. So, why opposition Nike?

One reason that springs to mind is that Nike has the perception of being the choice of the "best of the best" in basketball. Michael Jordan, considered by many to be the GOAT (Greatest Of All Time), helped immortalize the Nike brand, as the brand worked to immortalize him by sharing gravity-defying highlights of Michael Jordan leaping high above competitive players to dunk in their faces, and their launch of Air Jordan line of basketball shoes. The Sketchers brand is not asserting that you will play like Michael Jordan or any of the present-day stars. Instead, in oppositioning Nike, the Sketchers brand is declaring that they are made with quality and are, therefore, an acceptable choice for your athletic needs. At the very least, I believe they want you to feel that you shouldn't be embarrassed to be seen wearing Sketchers!

This reminds me of Pepsi's oppositioning of Coca-Cola during the 1970s and 80s – the Pepsi Challenge. The Pepsi Challenge was a publicized sip taste test showing taste testers from the population at large choosing Pepsi over Coke. The goal of the Pepsi Challenge wasn't to assert that Pepsi tastes better than Coca-Cola. It was to convince Coke drinkers that Pepsi was an acceptable alternative. Additionally, it rallied its bottler distribution system to fight Coke for shelf space and feature support. It also had the effect of driving Coca-Cola bottlers and the Company to distraction. Remember New Coke!?!

Oppositioning can be a very effective strategy. It helps clarify your meaningful differentiation, stimulates brand growth and, as noted above, can cause your competition to make mistakes. However, keep in mind that one must be careful not to denigrate competitive users. If one does so, then those users may rise against you. Case in point is the 2016 Presidential election where Hillary Clinton referred to Trump supporters as "deplorables." On the other hand, I recall Excedrin ads where they employed the "tip of the hat" tactic to opposition Tylenol in establishing and reinforcing that Excedrin is "The Headache Medicine." The ad portrayed consumers admitting to using Tylenol for minor aches and pains (tip of the hat), but when it came to headaches, they found that Tylenol does not work – but Excedrin does!

When oppositioning one needs to be careful not to go too far either. We don't want to awaken a sleeping giant with the power to retaliate and crush your brand. There's a story about the marketers at Miller Brewing Company that had floor mats made with the Anheuser-Busch logo. The marketers put these floormats under their desk where they would wipe and grind their feet into it. The AB folks found out about it and used it to rally their personnel to target and cutdown Miller Highlife.

I don't believe that Sketchers need worry about retaliation from Nike. They're not in the same league. (Besides their shoe did split!) Nor did Excedrin need to worry about Tylenol. The Tylenol brand would need to surrender too much of the pain reliever market for the headache segment, which is a good thing to keep in mind when considering oppositioning and which brand(s) you choose to opposition.

One final point, if you choose to engage in oppositioning, make sure that you are not violating any legal or regulatory strictures.

I imagine the folks at Sketchers are having a good laugh and feeling good about themselves.

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