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The new Colin Kaepernick campaign captures the tension between Nike's values and its reality

By [Natalia Mehlman Petrzela](#)

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Nike ignited a firestorm with the announcement that it has **re-signed** an endorsement deal with former NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick. During Thursday night's Eagles-Falcons game, the company **launched** its new "Just Do It" ads starring the quarterback best known for being blackballed for popularizing "taking a knee" during the national anthem as a protest of racism in America. The new Kaepernick contract and **ad** have boosted Nike's **bottom line**, while prompting a furious backlash from the president and his followers.

This new campaign fits with Nike's painstakingly developed image as a forward thinking, innovative company that has evolved from selling sneakers out of co-founder Phil Knight's trunk nearly half a century ago to promoting sports as an almost spiritual, self-actualizing exercise. Since 1988, the "Just Do It" ads in particular, featuring athletes including jogging folk hero Walt Stack, golfer Tiger Woods, tennis star Serena Williams and groups of girls gaining confidence through sport, have all cultivated this capacious sensibility.

But these inspirational branding efforts have often been out of step with the on-the-ground experience at Nike, where issues of equity have long dogged the corporate giant. Like all corporations, profit propels Nike, but the loftiness of its professed principles makes the disconnect with some of its internal practices seem especially stark.

The story behind "Just Do It," the iconic tagline that has, in recent days, become a viral hashtag (along with #JustBurnIt), suggests this contradiction and how crucial it is for consumers to critically consider what it means to turn to corporations as sources of inspiration for personal empowerment and social change.

In 1987, Nike adman Dan Wieden mashed up quotes from two unlikely figures: "Let's do it," the last words of convicted killer Gary Gilmore before his execution, and "Just Say No," the sunny slogan of first lady Nancy Reagan's anti-drug campaign.

If its origins are unsettling, "Just Do It" was extremely successful for the unconventional ways in which it engaged consumers. Co-founder Knight recalled that after the launch of ads bearing the slogan, Nike received fan letters for the first time, recounting stories of how the slogan inspired them in arenas unrelated to sports. A decade later, when the "Let Me Play" campaign memorably linked girls' sports participation to survival of domestic violence and lower cancer rates, the effusive calls poured in from "daughters of Title IX," the first generation that came of age with the athletic opportunities afforded by the landmark 1972 legislation.

This is the story, at least, that Nike likes to tell. "Born within weeks of Title IX," a 2014 retrospective in its archive recounts, "Nike has expanded the definition of the athlete." And it's partly true: This adventurous marketing laid a foundation for activism, such as pressuring the International Olympic Committee to include the women's marathon and 3,000-meter events in the 1984 games for the first time.

But these advertising and advocacy achievements obscure the lived experience of women at the company, who were often marginalized. In the 1980s, the company acknowledged "missing the mark," as many executives described it, on the aerobics boom that introduced millions of women to exercise (and put rival Reebok on the map with its 1982 Freestyle sneaker). But an alternative account suggests that executives didn't just "miss" signals from the 22 million, overwhelmingly female, aerobics enthusiasts; they ignored the insights of women working at Nike. As J.B. Strasser and Laurie Becklund write in "[Swoosh: The Unauthorized Story of Nike and the Men Who Played There](#)," "Nike product person" Judy Delaney had repeatedly pushed for the production of "a decent aerobics shoe," but "her presentations were often put off until the end of long product meetings" and then dismissed.

Nike's self-image was about promoting "authentic sport," the authors explained, as opposed to a "sissy fashion company" about to cater to some California trend that amounted to "nothing more than a bunch of fat ladies dancing to music." Indeed, a 2012 internal report issued by Nike's own archive exposed how the company's efforts to reach female consumers had been constrained by a desire not to dilute "a brand founded on testosterone."

In this context, it makes sense that Nike contributed to expanding women's participation in running, basketball and other sports already legitimized by men. But it dismissed fields, like aerobics, created by women. In the end, this was bad business.

Nike's tone deafness and unwillingness to listen to its own female employees even produced a rare advertising blunder in 1988. The company released an ad featuring triathlete Joanne Ernst, who urged

women participating in various exercises to “just do it”... and then added, “it wouldn't hurt to stop eating like a pig, either!” The blowback to what we today call body-shaming was swift.

Even Nike's greatest “Just Do It” success revealed the limits of the company's political daring and progressivism. In 1984, Michael Jordan, until then a die-hard Adidas fan, signed with the company. Jordan quickly became the centerpiece of an unprecedented marketing program and shoe and apparel line, prompting Nike to explode in popularity (and reinvigorate its bottom line after missing the aerobics opportunity). So great was the appeal of Jordan's signature shoes and apparel that it also boosted the visibility of the sport of basketball and the urban environments that gave rise to so many of its stars.

Yet as historian Walter LaFeber has written, Jordan was palatable to Nike — and enormously popular — in part because of his relative political silence. In the 1980s, this was a prerequisite for a black man landing a major endorsement deal, much less himself becoming a global brand as popular in affluent suburbs as in subsidized housing projects.

More problematic: The company took inspiration from African American culture and then sold it back to black consumers — some of [whom killed each other](#) over the expensive shoes — without reinvesting in their communities. This did not sit well with many activists. Operation PUSH, a civil rights organization founded by Jesse Jackson, in 1990 [called for a boycott](#) until Nike invested in black-owned banks and diversified its board of directors and workforce.

Ironically, just as Nike was expending more resources than ever to court women and African Americans with advertising that promised empowerment, the company faced its most serious scandal: the revelation that Nike apparel was produced in sweatshops where workers, many of them alarmingly young women of color, suffered horrifying conditions for less than a living wage. The accusations were inescapable, and in 1998, Knight acknowledged that the company “[had become synonymous with slave wages, forced overtime, and arbitrary abuse](#)” and vowed to lead the industry in improving labor conditions.

Over the past three decades, Nike has been forced to respond to such public criticisms about gender, race and labor because the brand it actively cultivates — one of being woke and socially aware — means that not doing so is bad for business. Nike has long delivered on far more than making shoes, and when it appears to wield that power irresponsibly, consumers revolt, be they progressives slashing swooshes in protest of sweatshops in the '90s or conservatives burning their basketball sneakers this week.

But Nike's history reveals that two things can be true at once. For decades, Nike *has* advanced people marginalized by mainstream athletic culture — whether the sidelined Colin Kaepernick or oppressed women surreptitiously seeking sport or amputees aspiring to do a triathlon — through its branding, advocacy, product development and philanthropy. But it has done so publicly while *also* enabling an internal culture of discrimination and inequality, from [sexual harassment at the Beaverton, Ore.](#),

corporate headquarters to sweatshop conditions in its factories that turn out products as varied as baseball cleats and breathable hijabs.

Nike's latest newsmaking campaign requires critical consumers to surrender the simplistic takes that cast the company as either boldly advancing progressive politics with its branding *or* hypocritically proclaiming anti-racist solidarity while exploiting communities of color *or* amorally commodifying radical protest to more swiftly move merchandise.

It is all true.

Advancing any political agenda is rarely a corporation's core purpose. But commercialization doesn't necessarily mean a co-opting so complete that movements, and certainly not their champions, are sapped entirely of their power. The vague "believe in something" might feel milquetoast in comparison with Kaepernick's pointed politics. But the Nike deal tacitly approves — and amplifies — the latter as much as it explicitly, if perhaps unsatisfyingly, articulates the former.

Right now we must ask questions not only of Nike but also of the many brands that have followed its lead in selling self-fulfillment and social justice along with sneakers and sweatpants. How in line is company practice with the ideals it advertises, not only for the white-collar workers but also for those on factory floors? How honestly does leadership strive to right past wrongs? And one for ourselves: How willing are we to demand expanding the definition of "empowerment" to mean more than the fleeting thrill of spending on and being seen in the latest style?



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