



Nike 'Just Do It' Campaign Starring Colin Kaepernick Stirs Controversy

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Nike took a hit on two fronts Tuesday after unveiling the latest iteration of its 'Just Do It' campaign, featuring the San Francisco 49ers' former quarterback Colin Kaepernick.

Kaepernick is credited with starting the movement of kneeling during the National Anthem before NFL games in protest against racial inequality and police brutality. Last Thursday, he prevailed over the first part of a lawsuit he has filed against the NFL, with an arbitrator dismissing the NFL's bid to have the case thrown out, according to the New York Times.

News of the campaign, which Nike is creating in honor of 'Just Do It's 30th anniversary, broke on Labor Day, Monday, Sept. 3, when Kaepernick tweeted:

Believe in something, even if it means sacrificing everything. #JustDoIt
pic.twitter.com/SRWkMIDdaO

- Colin Kaepernick (@Kaepernick7) September 3, 2018

"We believe Colin is one of the most inspirational athletes of this generation, who has leveraged the power of sport to help move the world forward," Gino Fisanotti, Nike's brand VP for North America, told ESPN's Darren Rovell.

When the stock market opened Tuesday after the long Labor Day weekend, Nike's market capitalization plunged \$3.75 billion, reported The Wrap. By the end of the day, however, the stock was down only 3 percent to \$79.60 per share. The stock's 52-week high is \$83.68 per share.

"When you're talking about what a company stands for, the short-term impact on a stock price or media backlash pales in comparison to their commitment to long-term values," said Simon Mainwaring, CEO of purpose-driven marketing firm WeFirst Branding. "Nike has always made the tough decisions when it comes to standing up for its core values and, over the long-term, doing so again will be great for the business, its brand, and athletes everywhere."

The NFL itself backed Nike and Kaepernick in a statement:

"The National Football League believes in dialogue, understanding and unity. We embrace the role and responsibility of everyone involved with this game to promote meaningful, positive change in our communities," said Jocelyn Moore, the NFL's executive vice president of communications and public affairs, in a statement. "The social justice issues that Colin and other professional athletes have raised deserve our attention and action."

Many people lashed out against Nike on social media. Kneeling during the National Anthem has become a national issue, with President Donald Trump frequently tweeting about it and saying that NFL players who kneel should be fired.

The social-media backlash came fast and furious, with tweets such as:

This is pretty tone deaf. THIS is actually what it means to "sacrifice everything". Not comparable. @Nike pic.twitter.com/hkdo1qWFxr

- Tianabelle (@tianabelle) September 4, 2018

A desperate act by an out of style, overpriced brand

- Gary Kokalari (@gqkokalari) September 4, 2018

Just bought a pair, now I regret it #Kaepernickicksucks

- David Boozer (@dboozeman) September 4, 2018 Many people posted pictures

of themselves on social media burning their Nike gear or cutting the Nike symbol out of their socks and clothes.

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First the @NFL forces me to choose between my favorite sport and my country. I chose country. Then @Nike forces me to choose between my favorite shoes and my country. Since when did the American Flag and the National Anthem become offensive? pic.twitter.com/4CVQdTHUH4

- Sean Clancy (@sclancy79) September 3, 2018

That said, other people joined the conversation to support both Kaepernick and Nike. NBA star LeBron James and tennis legend Serena Williams, both of whom also have contracts with Nike and will appear in spots of their own during the campaign, backed Kaepernick and Nike, reported The Washington Post.

Especially proud to be a part of the Nike family today. #justdoit
pic.twitter.com/GAZtkAlwbk

- Serena Williams (@serenawilliams) September 4, 2018

James shared Kaepernick's tweet on his own account @kingjames, while other athletes, such as the Los Angeles Chargers offensive tackle Russell Okung, another Nike athlete, also got on board.

Be like NIKE, don't be like Papa Johns. #JustDolt

- Russell Okung (@RussellOkung) September 4, 2018

Other athletes that will be featured include New York Giants' wide receiver Odell Beckham Jr., Seattle Seahawks' linebacker Shaquem Griffin and skateboarder Lacey Baker.

Besides athletes, civilian support for the campaign was almost equal to protest, with people tweeting such things as:

Never showed respect to a company like #nike before, but credit where credit's due. #ColinKaepernick is a great role model and brand representative. Also, the

#justburnit campaign will ensure that your brand isn't being worn by idiots

- Rovlene Rose (@RovleneRose) September 4, 2018

What is more respectful than kneeling? We do it at church! @Kaepernick7 I respect you deeply and applaud @Nike for recognizing what an amazing man and role model you are. I would be proud to know you & I cheer you on hope that your courage inspires others.

- Jan Mostrom (@j_mostrom) September 4, 2018

The debate over the Nike campaign comes at a tough time for the NFL, which is still unclear about its policy around players taking a knee in protest. In May, the 32 team owners agreed to leave disciplinary actions up to the teams, but in July, a separate agreement with the NFL Players Association put that policy on hold.

Whether you side with #TakeAKnee or #BoycottNike, the debate has already given Nike a great deal of exposure, with mentions of the brand up 135 percent across social media, according to social-media analytics firm Talkwalker. That includes more than 2.7 million mentions in the 24 hours after Kaepernick's tweet, up 1,400 percent from the previous day.

Brief Take: Nike has always leaned into its identity as a purpose-driven brand, but it remains to be seen how making this bold and divisive choice will play out for the sportswear provider.