



Nike Marketing Stunt Evolves Into Nat Geo Documentary

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At what point does a sports merchandiser become a content creation company?

Perhaps when they partner with National Geographic Channel to produce an hour-long documentary chronicling the attempt by three runners to complete a marathon in a record-breaking two hours-while subtly plugging their own products.

That's exactly what Nike has done with Breaking 2, set to debut September 20 on the cable network.

The innovative advertiser expertly blends the line between editorial and marketing with a film that touts a strong narrative and stands on its own as a valuable piece of entertainment.

Nike commissioned a race that began on May 5, 2017 in Monza, Italy, at 5:45 a.m. There were no crowds cheering, no throng of competitors to contend with; just a quiet, tense morning for a handful of runners beneath a rising sun. A black Tesla Model S with a digital clock mounted on its roof led them around a track, displaying their splits and helping them maintain a constant pace.

Nike live streamed the whole thing, and more than 13.1 million viewers tuned in across Twitter, Facebook and YouTube, with another 6.9 million catching up after it was over, Variety reports.

Breaking 2 follows three runners from that day: half-marathon current world-record holder Zersenay Tadese, two-time Boston Marathon winner Lelisa Desisa, and Eliud Kipchoge, who set a new marathon world record of 2:00:25 in Nike's project-falling just short of the two-hour goal, but proving it may not be as insane as previously thought.

At the end of the day, Breaking 2 is a compelling story about the impossible quest of three athletes to push themselves to extremes never before seen-to "Just Do It"-while they happen to be decked out in the company's signature gear and new kicks: Nike Zoom Vaporfly Elite with Nike ZoomX Midsole sneakers intended to help distance runners improve their performance.

The racing flat incorporates superlight, responsive foam used in aircraft insulation, embedded with a spoon-shaped carbon-fiber plate designed to stiffen the shoe and rock runners forward, Wired reports.

In March, Nike unveiled both elite and consumer versions of the footwear to the public.

The project "has directly informed" some of the product innovations released to consumers in recent months, Nikki Neuburger, Nike's vice president of brand marketing, global running, told Variety.

Chris Uettwiller, CEO of the production studio Dirty Robber that worked on Breaking 2, told the trade publication that he anticipates a rise in this type of branded content as the concept of 30-second commercials that interrupt programs becomes less appealing.

"We feel like this may be the first of many projects where brands can tell stories that don't feel like 'brand pieces,'" he said. "The information itself is not from a Nike ad. It's not there to sell. It shows the story of these three incredible athletes trying to do something that seems almost not human. It just happens to be part of a Nike project."

That, in a nutshell, was the draw for National Geographic.

Nike was aware it had something interesting, and began seeking pitches from media outlets in order to reach a wider audience. Brendan Ripp, EVP of sales and partnerships at National Geographic Partners, told Variety they saw an opportunity to emphasise the behavior and science elements of the sports story, such as testing in wind tunnels and running labs, to daily training in Africa, according to The Drum.

"With Nike as the perfect partner in telling this remarkable story, Breaking 2 is

about pushing limits and going further," Ripp said to the publication.

"This project has been over two years in the making and with National Geographic's unparalleled global reach, we hope to bring this story of passion and courage to create conversation and inspire people to think differently about how they approach their daily lives," Nike's Neuburger added.

The two companies worked out a partnership that established an editorial standard. Nike could scan the storyboard and rough edits, but National Geographic would have the final say on the project.

"I wanted to make sure the story was as authentic as possible," Ripp said to Variety. Credits at the beginning of the documentary also make Nike's involvement clear early on. "We were incredibly honest with the consumer," Ripp added.

Nike isn't the only one playing around recently with high-quality branded content meant to entertain. In July Apple released The Rock x Siri Dominate the Day, a fun, four minute "short film" that warns viewers not to underestimate what Dwayne Johnson can get done when relying on the voice assistant technology.

AT&T also debuted a funny, under-two-minute spot promoting its video channel for Taylor Swift, that shows what the pop star is up to now, and now and now as she goes about the mundane tasks of her day.

This movement of producing ad content meant to be as entertaining as the TV show or movie that it will no longer cut into is steadily growing, Variety reports.

"This is going to be a trend going forward," Ripp said.

And Nike's Neuburger sees Breaking 2 as just the beginning.

"If I could do one of these projects every year," she told Variety, "I would."

[Image credit: Wired/Cait Oppermann]

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