

The Downside of Branding

April 6, 2010

From HBC's Sound Bites Blog (www.hellermanbaretz.com/soundbites)

Good branding isn't just a matter of slapping your firm's name on any blank surface you can find. (Like, for instance, the local [minor league baseball stadium](#).) Instead, smart professional firms look for opportunities to associate their name with carefully chosen products, events, and individuals that reinforce their brand identity.

For years, Rolex has been the "[official timekeeper](#)" of the Wimbledon tennis championships. Wimbledon has the same classy, exclusive appeal of a fine luxury good, and therefore makes a perfect fit for the Rolex brand. Likewise, a healthy breakfast cereal might wisely associate itself with [athletic champions](#).

So far, so good. But despite a firm's best efforts to link itself to events and people that reinforce its image, sometimes things can go wrong. To wit:

Accenture shouldn't be criticized for selecting Tiger Woods as a spokesperson. Nobody saw his PR disaster coming, and as [Accenture](#) has rightly said, Woods's "achievements on the golf course have been a powerful metaphor for business success in Accenture's advertising."

Still, as unavoidable (from Accenture's perspective) and unique as the Tiger Woods drama has been, it's a reminder of the significant risks that come with placing your logo in someone else's hands. Those are risks that virtually all marketers should be cognizant of, not just those hiring megawatt celebrities. For a demonstration of this principle, see below:



[This image](#), which we don't expect you'll find on the KPMG website, was captured in a Spanish town that has become a haven for young Brits celebrating spring-break style vacations, with all the drunkenness and obnoxious behavior that such a description implies. The young revelers have become a scourge of the local population, and the above image comes from a television crew doing a story about just how disturbing the young Brits have been. It has now been spread around the globe in the UK's Daily Mail.

Because this one individual is wearing a KPMG shirt, the firm has become -- much to its consternation, undoubtedly -- tightly associated with this story.

Did KPMG make any mistake here? Quite possibly not. There's nothing inherently wrong with putting your logo on a shirt. For the [right occasions](#) (community service days, fun runs, etc.), printing up corporate t-shirts is a fine way to show off your brand while building team spirit. There may well have been nothing they could do to prevent this from happening. Maybe the guy doesn't even work for KPMG.

Unfortunately for the firm, though, this picture -- featuring a group of people in similar yellow shirts -- gives an impression that the rude gesticulations took place on some kind of official, company-endorsed boozefest. And with summer associates on the way, this is a picture for law firms to keep in mind. Give out your shirts before events at which your summers are representing the best side of your firm, not right before they head out for a jaunt to Tijuana.