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WOMEN IN THE OLYMPICS—HOW BRANDS CAN SUPPORT FEMALE ATHLETES BEYOND THE GAMES

5 ways marketers can advocate for athletes on and off the field

By [Christine Guilfoyle](#), Published on July 30, 2024.

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Procter & Gamble's long-running "Thank You, Mom" Olympic campaign showcases important people in athletes' lives and how their support fueled their success.
Credit: P&G

This year's Olympics will be a pivotal moment in history as female athletes seize the spotlight like never before.

The Paris Games are the first to have gender parity, with equal numbers of men and women competing. Olympian women will soon be showcased on broadcast, streaming and social media platforms as marketers and media capitalize on this watershed moment.

But parity between male and female athletes doesn't mean equality.

Women still lag woefully behind men in almost all areas of sports, including pay, sponsorship deals, media exposure and roles such as coaches, referees and commentators. They are also underrepresented in sports leadership, comprising just 27% of the executive leadership at 31 major international sports federations. A mere three women chair those federations, according to 2023 research by the Sport Integrity Global Alliance presented at Mastercard.

In a positive move toward equality, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) has released guidelines and taken steps to make the Games more inclusive of women. For instance, the IOC has trained 123 female coaches from 22 sports and 60 countries. Still, only 10% of all coaches at the Games will be female. At the same time, the vast majority of Olympic commentators—eight in 10—are men.

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There are dire consequences when women's athletics get only a bump in attention and investment during significant events such as the Olympics, World Cup and NCAA/WNBA basketball. It perpetuates stereotypes, limits the potential visibility of female role models and reinforces the gender gap.

Marketers, media organizations and agencies can change this. While such support is good for the world at large, there's also a compelling business case to back women's sports.

Studies show that consumers of both genders want organizations to invest in women's athletics. According to a poll by Association of Sports




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
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interest in women's basketball, according to a poll by Aggregate Sports, 77% of surveyed men and women say brands should sponsor women's sports, and 74% say brands should provide equal support.

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From NCAA basketball to the WNBA Draft, viewership of women's sports is also soaring. This growing interest includes other sports such as softball, volleyball, track and field, golf, tennis and soccer.

So it pays off to court female fans who pack a powerful economic punch. Globally, women control over \$31 trillion in annual consumer spending, according to the World Economic Forum. In aggregate, women represent a growth market bigger than China and India combined.

And there's a clear ROI for companies that authentically feature women, including female athletes, in campaigns, according to SeeHer's Gender Equality Measure, which examines how women are presented in advertising and other content. High-scoring creative work drives a tenfold sales lift for brands across gender, generations, race and ethnicity.

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Playing sports also offers invaluable lessons for children, teaching them perseverance, teamwork and leadership skills. For girls in particular, it has been shown to boost confidence and self-esteem. And the impact lasts — 94% of female C-suite executives played sports when they were younger, 52% at the university level, according to an EY/ESPNW report.

Marketers and media that ignore women's sports or support them only during major events miss significant growth opportunities and risk damaging their brands. Today's consumers are quick to call out companies that fail to support women consistently.

SeeHer in Sports has advocated for women in athletics since 2019. In those five years, we've gleaned invaluable qualitative and quantitative data while identifying best practices. With that information in mind, here's how organizations can implement effective women's sports strategies:

Provide continuous, comprehensive support

Go all-in on your commitment. Ally Bank stands out in this area. In 2022, it announced a "50/50 pledge" to spend equal amounts on paid media advertising across men's and women's sports within five years. It's made significant progress, hitting a 60/40 split in December. Marketers, media and entertainment firms can earmark their backing in numerous ways that resonate with their brand values, from supporting girls and women interested in sports marketing to backing budding referees and coaches.

Tell meaningful stories

Avoid the superficial and dig deeper to share the true motivations, concerns, triumphs and struggles of each female athlete, such as mental health challenges or being the only person of a race/sexual orientation on a team. Highlight important people in their lives and showcase how that support fueled their success. Procter & Gamble's long-running "Thank You, Mom" Olympic campaign, which included athletes such as gymnast Simone Biles, and Minute Maid's #doinggood effort, which featured Missy Franklin, are tremendous examples of the latter approach.

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Steer clear of stereotypes and sexualization

Celebrate female athletes for their true selves. Showcase their unique style and personality, not a polished, contrived or airbrushed version. For instance, AT&T's She's Connected series features female athletes in long-form creative that highlights their many dimensions, such as careers outside their sport or philanthropic endeavors. AT&T supplies these athletes with technology solutions to support their jobs, side hustles or charitable work; access to a corporate mentorship program; and personal brand-building resources.

Foster widespread Inclusivity

Tap into the talents of female producers, directors, editors and writers. And when working with athletes, ensure they are included on sets, shoots and events. This often means seeking insights and ideas from experts who know more than you do, including well-established sports marketing agencies that have a concentration in women's sports.

Tap Into the knowledge of others

Not every business has every answer. Foster an open dialog with partners, such as agencies, the Women's Sports Foundation, SeeHer and other authorities, to identify and address areas where you can improve your support for women athletes or begin building out your practice.

The growth and excitement for women's athletics will continue to expand. Companies that sit on the sidelines will miss significant business opportunities. And our daughters, nieces, granddaughters and other females will lose out on deserved support.

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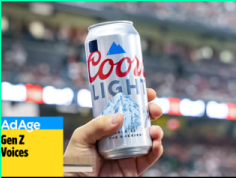
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