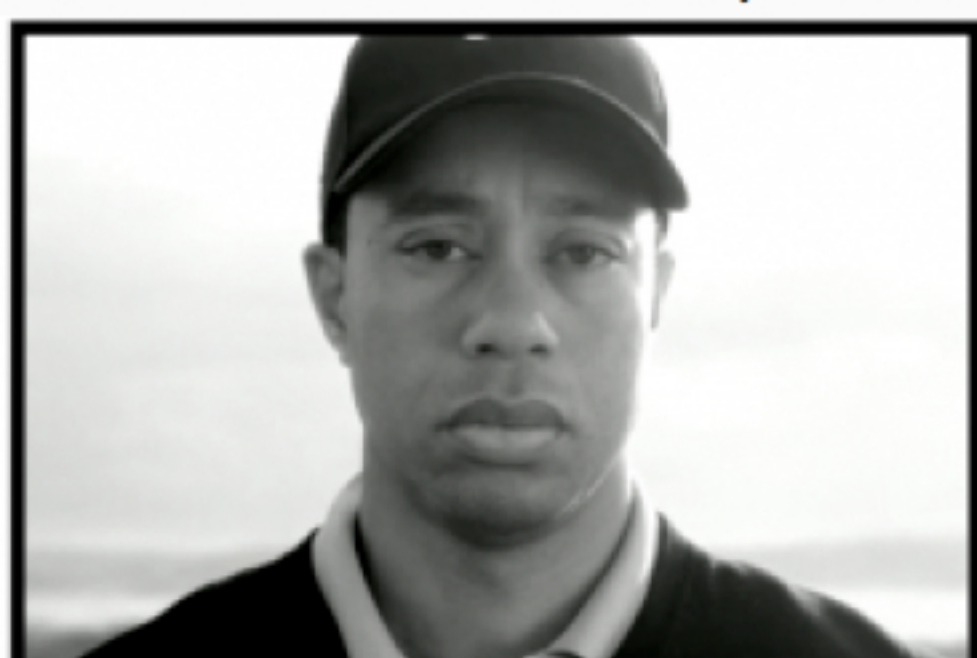
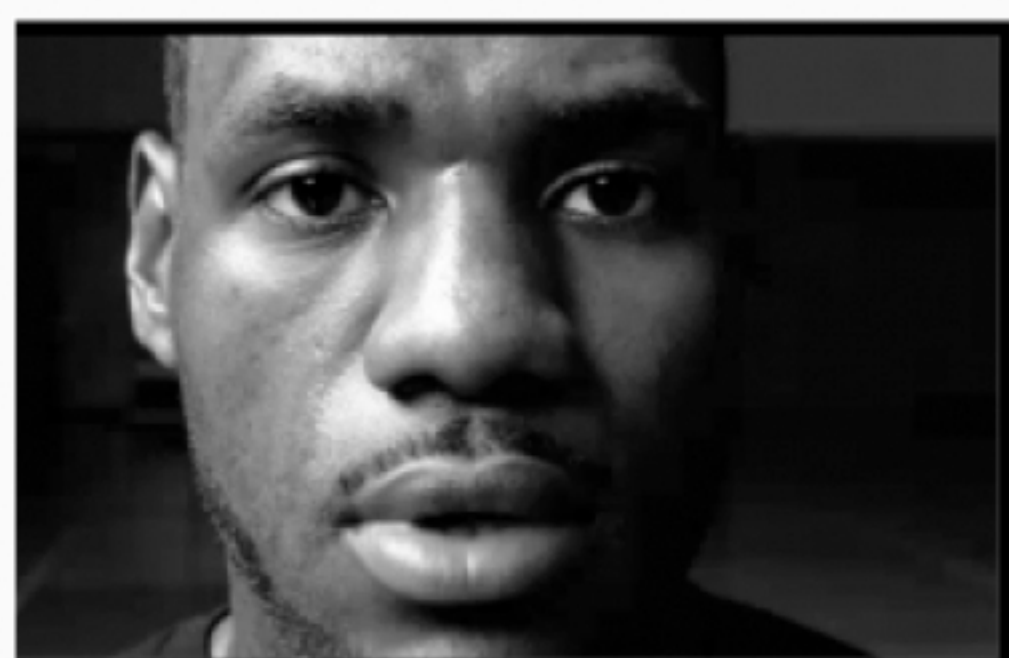


## Remember When Commericals Sold Products Instead Of People?



If you've watched a quarter of a basketball game in this young season, you've seen Nike's new "What Should I Do?" spots with **LeBron James**. **You know the one**. It's the new spot the point of which is to underscore that what's done is done, it was a mistake, let's move on.

But the real thrust of the commercial is Nike making an every-chemical-in-the-cupboard approach to removing the tarnish from the LeBron James Brand.

For those of you who've missed out, the athletic apparel company in its full high-gloss brilliance opens on James back in his familiar school gym setting, wearing the same clothes he wore during his infamous ESPN Decision special that marks the seminal moment he went from the face of the league, to its pariah. Also in the commercial are a series of hypothetical scenarios involving the current and possible future state of his reputation (no one shows up to his Hall of Fame induction ceremony, he quits basketball and moves to television, etc.) all while the phrase "what should I do?" is repeated ad nauseum.

As a commercial, it plays just too damn cynical. As if filming a multi-million dollar mea culpa designed to ensure the company still gets paid is all the James naysayers needed to rejoin the bandwagon. And for those who never left the bandwagon? Well, they probably liked those awful Nike puppet commercials too.

As an advertising tactic, however, Nike has taken a step into a whole new realm this year. The company has made its fortune on hand-picking the best athletes in the country and illuminating each of them as being wholly special. The danger is, and always has been, what happens when these imperfect people do something imperfect enough that it can't be ignored? Nike's answer has become to halt the sale of apparel and to produce 60-second, million-dollar public relations pieces that play like public service announcements. If any politician in any realm of government ever got his hands on Nike's ad department, there wouldn't be an election he or she couldn't win.

Earlier this year, Nike spin doctored the insanity coming from **Tiger Woods'** Thanksgiving drive into a light pole and the ensuing sewage that erupted from that incident by producing a **well-received ad** of Woods – alone – listening to the voice of his dead father. The piece was clearly saying, "we all make mistakes, it's not too late to turn things around." Added to which the only sound in the spot is of a Woods' father, a known-philanderer, the audience is supposed to be reminded that even the monster that is Tiger Woods has a family. He's only human.

Woods' spot, just like James,' is more intriguing than entertaining and only intriguing when you consider the motivation of the ad men who work for Phil Knight. Nike used to have its finger on a certain pulse of its demographic. When it produced Charles Barkley's "I'm Not A Role Model" spot in 1993 (James winks at this spot in his current ad – another example of Nike's self-referential cynicism) it struck a chord with audiences because Barkley was a role model despite his reputation for being tough and ornery. The difference between that commercial 17 years ago and a commercial with Barkley, say, last year after getting pulled over for drunk driving is that Barkley had never done anything that the public perceived as being bad. The Woods and James spots are apologies, not warnings. Not statements. Not even clear ownership of who these individuals are.

In the end, it all strikes me as infuriating. Nike is willing to acknowledge that their poster boys do bad things, but not that, perhaps, they shouldn't be poster boys. This isn't a judgment call on either athlete – or any athlete facing similar backlash – I don't really care about James and anyone who thinks Tiger Woods hasn't paid for his actions is out of his mind. But when a company like Nike begins airing its damage control over and over (and if you watch as much basketball as I do, over and over and over and over), one can't help but wonder if someone shouldn't be producing PR ads for Nike. After all, they branded James and Woods (and, oh yeah, sexual harasser **Brett Favre**, accused rapist **Kobe Bryant** and dog-lover **Michael Vick**) in the first place.

LeBron James is as poor a reflection on Nike as on LeBron James and as uninterested as I am in apologies from fools and louts, I'm even less interested in pleas from multi-billion dollar corporations to continue increasing their net growth disguised as an apology.

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