

Good Sports

From sporting goods to pizzerias, business owners are turning to professional athletes to sell their products and services.

BY JOE MULLICH

Kool-Aid wanted to market a new ready-to-drink version of its fruit punch to inner-city kids in New Jersey. So the company turned to "The Pearl." Kids who brought proof-of-purchases from a new Kool-Aid product could attend basketball clinics with Hall of Famer Earl "The Pearl" Monroe. More than 1,000 kids in Paterson, Elizabeth, Newark and Jersey City attended.

"We got thank-you letters from people saying they hung the picture of Earl Monroe in their kitchen," says Michael Ritz, vice president of promotion for PSP Sports Marketing in New York. "The picture has a Kool-Aid logo on it, so now we have built-in commercials in their homes."

New Jersey has been a hot area this year for sports marketing. Brandon Steiner, president of Steiner Sports Marketing in New York, traces this in part to the use of athlete appearances by the state's retailers as a way to drive up sales in a soft market. "An athlete can cause a lot of traffic," says Steiner, citing the Muscular Dystrophy Association's Aisles of Smiles fund-raiser — featuring sports figures Rodney Hampton and Blair Thomas — which raised \$150,000.

The cost of using sports figures in marketing programs can run anywhere from \$5,000 to millions for the Michael Jordans of the sports world. The amount depends on who the athlete is and what you want him or her to do. Want Arnold Palmer to play a few holes with a prospective client? That runs a cool \$75,000.

"The last clause in an athlete's contract involves the percentage of business he can bring in," says Steiner. "It's natural that the athlete will come into contact with a lot of people at high levels. And that's the thing in marketing and sales — it's very hard to get to the high-up decision-makers. Athletes, though, are at those expensive dinners

and banquets with the business heavyweights."

The first step in using an athlete is to pinpoint your company's message and decide how an athlete can help get that message out. "Do you need more people to know about your company? Then you might want an athlete with flair. If you run a messenger service and you're pushing speed,

maybe you hire a running back," Steiner says.

When it comes to sports marketing, the biggest names don't always make the best match. The main customer base for Herman's World of Sporting Goods, headquartered in Wayne, consists of people ages 35 to 40. "They're a little more conservative, so Herman's goes with older athletes like Johnny Unitas, Rick Barry and Earl Monroe," says Steiner.

Another retail chain specifically avoids having high-profile athletes at its grand openings because it causes too much havoc. The chain signs lesser-known athletes whom customers might be excited to meet, but wouldn't necessarily attract every autograph hound in the area.

Indeed, when O.J. Simpson attended a trade show on behalf of Hertz Corp. in Park Ridge, the area had to be cordoned off to control the crowd.

The personality of the athlete must also fit a company's needs. "There are athletes out there who sit signing autographs and say, 'next kid, next kid,'" says Ritz. "Earl Monroe is the kind of guy who can just come off double hip-replacement surgery and be out there running drills. Kids can see through things, so when you're doing an event for them, you have to choose the right athlete who's approachable. A lot of guys have big heads."

When Nick Pollaro opened a Firehouse Pizzeria franchise in Bloomfield, he chose a sports motif similar to the sports bar he once owned. On grand opening day for his four



Aisles of smiles: Sports figures Rodney Hampton (left) and Blair Thomas (right) with MDA poster child Joey Baur.