

Sneaking Up

How did Onitsuka Tiger become a global player in the sporting goods category in five years without running a single TV spot? How did its marketing strategy build and propagate an aura of “cool scarcity”?

Working with modest budgets, we riveted attention with guerrilla marketing, unconventional digital media tactics, and holistic strategies that tied together everything from in-store events to design, packaging, event marketing—and stuff that can’t even be categorized.



“Anything and everything is an ad,” says Katsumi Kato, vice president of marketing, Asics Europe B.V. Everything except television commercials, that is.

Onitsuka Tiger scarcely used traditional television commercials to achieve its success. This heresy in a business that typically spends hundreds of millions of dollars as the goliaths—Nike and Adidas—slug it out with million-dollar 30-second spots.

Madison Avenue has been promising for years to cut back on its TV habit and provide solutions that address today’s fragmented media landscape. But few have delivered. Enter Onitsuka Tiger (OT).

We scattered the first OT campaign around Cannes during the launch of *Kill Bill* by Quentin Tarantino, as the world’s journalists descended on the global film-festival. We developed a Chinese take-out box that included shoelaces wrapped as chopsticks, a pair of signed Onitsuka “Taichi” sneakers in golden yellow, and fortune cookies. Each package was hand delivered to more than 1,000 of the world’s most influential cultural opinion-leaders and journalists.

The brand quickly became infectious. Quentin Tarantino personally asked us to produce and run a short, five-minute film featuring OT sneakers, entitled *The Running Fish Gutter*, to run at the premiere of *Kill Bill II* in Hollywood and in key cities worldwide.

Onitsuka Tiger ambushes Nike and Adidas with an explosion of TV-free ideas.

Kill Bill paraphernalia started popping up on OT posters, leaflets, T-shirts, stickers, booklets, and other gear. Lots and lots of shoes started flying off the shelves.

The next campaign centered on the global Olympics in Athens. Once again, the world’s journalists converged on one spot on earth. The story has been widely told: We went to Japan and put the original breath of Japanese gold medal athletes into hermetically-sealed bags and then canned it as “Hero Breath”—the only legal performance enhancement drug for athletes at the games.

Once again, with an equally small ad budget, we captured the attention of the global media-scene as Olympians started testing positive for drugs during the games. Images of OT’s “Hero Breath” started appearing in newspapers worldwide. By the time the season’s OT shoes were introduced into stores around Europe, they were sold out.

Suddenly, everyone wanted a piece of Onitsuka Tiger. The OT brand started to open its own stores across the globe. Our agency turned down buyout offers from the Madison Avenue holding companies that control most of the advertising business. However, the big ideas just kept coming.

We created the Onitsuka Tiger Choir, made up of OT employees at the company's headquarters in Kobe, Japan. They recorded a famous soccer song, entitled *Lovely Football*, for the World's Cup in Germany last summer.

The song was delivered by CD and Mp3 players to journalists and the coolest DJs across the soccer-loving world. The world's first quirky Karaoke website challenged visitors to sing along with the choir and beat singers worldwide. The OT Choir became a cult favorite and an instant hit with the street crowd, further expanding the global OT fan community.

Once our central thesis was in place, we really turned the process upside down. Normally, ad agencies make ads to fill bought media like magazine pages or 30-second TV spots. But we began with an open slate — as if there were no TV and no outdoor. How do we make the brand hot?

The next campaign featured Japanese Manga-style comic books that featured legendary characters like Ninja Witches, snow goblins and OT's take off on the Power Rangers.

Our partnership with OT was off to a fast start, and the next campaign, "Made of Japan," took it to the next level. The campaign featured seven-foot sculptures by Gary Baseman made out of elements from Japanese culture. The sculptures were featured in OT stores, art galleries, and at major press events. They exploded in ads, booklets, in-stores, online at madeofjapan.com — everywhere.

As *Freshness Magazine* reported: "One of the hottest ads I've seen! This Onitsuka Tiger ad by StrawberryFrog, "Made of Japan", is a collaboration with artist Gary Baseman and photographer Marcel Christ. The Onitsuka sneaker is made completely of toys, most of which are designed by Gary Baseman. HOT!"



Since the first day, five years ago, that Japan's first athletic footwear company, Asics, decided to relaunch its legendary original heritage brand, the buzzwords have been momentum and innovation.

The company was founded by an innovative legend, Kihachiro Onitsuka, widely acknowledged as the father of the Japanese sneaker. This has made our job easier because the culture of experimental courage and boldness has made the OT brand an enormously popular one.

The results speak for themselves. In just five years, Onitsuka Tiger has gone from zero sales to millions of sneakers sold worldwide. Most important, it is a brand that feels more underground, authentic and cool — and less of a big mass 'sold-out' corporate shoe company — than its television-addled competitors. ■



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