

My Jackie Robinson Dilemma

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I believe that Jackie Robinson is the most important athlete ever, not only because he broke baseball's color line but because of the way he changed much of America's thinking about race relations.

Major League Baseball has done an excellent job of keeping Robinson's endeavors from being confined to the trunks of the Hall of Fame. In 1997, his uniform number 42 was retired, only to be used again every April 15, designated "Jackie Robinson Day," when every player on every team, wears No. 42.



To commemorate the 100th anniversary of Robinson's birth, Budweiser launched a campaign that includes a film about Robinson by Spike Lee, commemorative number 42 beer bottles and a fund raising effort for the Jackie Robinson Foundation.

It is Bud's fund raising marketing effort that is the cause of my Jackie Robinson dilemma. For each of the bottles sold, the company has said 42 cents will be donated to raise money for the foundation.

- According to a report (2015) by the Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, an estimated 88,000 people (*approximately 62,000 men and 26,000 women*) die from alcohol-related causes annually, making alcohol the third leading preventable cause of death in the United States. (*The first is tobacco, and the second is poor diet and physical inactivity.*)

It also said that research indicates that alcohol use during the teenage years could interfere with normal adolescent brain development and increase the risk of developing alcohol use disorder. In addition; underage drinking contributes to a range of acute consequences, including injuries, sexual assaults, and even deaths—including those from car crashes.

The report also said the negative affects of alcohol on college students between the ages of 18 and 24 include deaths, assaults by another student who has been drinking and date rape. Also, roughly 20 percent of college students meet the criteria for alcohol use disorder and about 1 in 4 college students report academic consequences from drinking, including missing class, falling behind in class, doing poorly on exams or papers, and receiving lower grades overall.

(During my careers, as a sports reporter and [PR](#) practitioner, many times I saw the negative affects that beer drinking had on individuals. Fortunately, I was able to stop after my second alcoholic drink; others were not as fortunate.)

Unlike the tobacco industry, the alcohol business has thrived on sports telecasts, with the blessing of MLB. *(MLB knows how drinking beer can lead to unruly and dangerous behavior. Beer is now sold in paper cups rather than bottles at ballparks.)* Many of the TV commercials are tagged with “drink responsibly” messages, which seemingly satisfy the sports leagues and broadcasting business execs that permitting drinking commercials during telecasts of their games inoculates them from adding to the drinking problem.

Beer and sports have been entwined at the hip for decades. As if that wasn't bad enough, MLB now allows liquor ads during the telecasts of its games, despite the programs having a large teen audience. *(For those too young to know, until the government stepped in, MLB also permitted tobacco ads on its broadcasts, despite scientific evidence that using the products would cause major health problems. On April 1, 1970,*

President Richard Nixon signed the Public Health Cigarette Smoking Act, which banned cigarette ads from airing on television and radio.)

Given the prevalence of alcoholism in our society and the high TV ratings of sports telecasts, the partnership between alcoholic beverages, TV sports programming and the leagues is certainly detrimental to large segments of the TV audience, especially to impressionable youngsters. Given its history of partnering with unhealthy products, it's not surprising that MLB would permit a beer company to use Jackie Robinson Day in a marketing campaign.

I've never been a supporter of campaigns that disguise themselves as good corporate citizens by giving a few cents to a worthy cause for every product they sell, because in the overwhelming majority the prime reason for the tie-in is to make the company look good while hawking its wares.

(I once managed a national campaign for a company that wanted to help a cause. The money was raised from visitor's contributions to an exhibit. There was no tie-in to a product sale. What the company received was good publicity.)

Some businesses in the past have said that any profit from selling a product will be donated to a worthy cause. Bud has not said that, making it, in my opinion, a beer selling promotion.

A Budweiser ad I saw in the April 15 New York Times concluded with "This Bud's For Jackie." I wonder how he would feel if he knew that his name was being used by a product that has had such a detrimental affect on so many people.

Many people – probably a substantial majority – consider the Budweiser promotion a brilliant marketing strategy. And if you connect the dots, Jackie Robinson and baseball, baseball and beer it seems like a perfect fit.

But in my view, tying Jackie Robinson to a product that has caused so many problems for so many people of all ages is as distasteful as if a marketing campaign used other great people to hawk products – like F.D.R. to a cigarette holder and Winston Churchill to a cigar brand.

I honor Jackie Robinson's memory. He was a great ballplayer; more important he was a great American. But there are so many other ways to keep Robinson's achievements alive and raise money for the Jackie Robinson Foundation than partnering with a brew.

I watched the New York Mets on TV on April 15, witnessing the tributes Robinson deserves while drinking a beverage, but it wasn't a Budweiser, because using Jackie Robinson in a beer promotion leaves a bad taste in my mouth.

Jackie Robinson once said: *"A life is not important except in the impact it has on other lives,"* which he certainly had. I'm certain he didn't have the negative impact drinking beer has had on so many people in mind when he said it.



About the Author: *Arthur Solomon, a former journalist, was a senior VP/senior counselor at Burson-Marsteller, and was responsible for restructuring, managing and playing key roles in some of the most significant national and international sports and non-sports programs. He also traveled internationally as a media adviser to high-ranking government officials. He now is a frequent contributor to public relations publications, consults on public relations projects and is on the Seoul Peace Prize nominating committee. He can be reached at arthursolomon4pr (at) junos.com*