

## Hits From The Bong: Brands Stand By Phelps

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Published: 1 hour 26 min ago

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Singapore - The now infamous Michael Phelps photograph has highlighted the risks involved with brands endorsing individual sports stars but as local experts explain, it's of little surprise that the Olympic gold-medalist's sponsors have expressed their continued support.

Phelps, who won a remarkable eight gold medals at last year's Beijing Olympics, was thrown to the wolves of the world media when a British tabloid published a photo of the 23-year-old smoking marijuana. Phelps immediately issued a public apology, by way of a media statement, and a number of his sponsors - including Speedo and Omega - were quick to stand by their swimming superstar.

According to Ben Flint, Asia regional director for sponsorship research company Repucom, the fact Phelps fronted up and admitted to his mistake worked in his favour. His outstanding feats in the pool, which bring his sponsors huge benefits in terms of sales and brand exposure, far override such a mistake.

"Of course (sponsoring an individual athlete) is a risk but with every sort of communications medium that people can choose from, there are risks involved with all of them," Flint said.

"You can take out an ad campaign that no one watches or you can endorse an athlete who's photographed smoking a bong. There are pros and cons with every form of communication - you just have to weigh up the dollar investment against the potential risks."

Recent history is littered with athletes who have been dropped by sponsors for far worse behaviour, a recent example being former NFL star Michael Vick who was convicted for his involvement in a dog-fighting ring. He was subsequently dropped by Nike while numerous other companies suspended their sales of Michael Vick merchandise.

Head of Citrus Public Relations Ian Grundy, who has worked for many years in the sports sponsorship industry, is also of the belief that Phelps' sponsors did the right thing by sticking by their athlete.

"I'm pleased they've gone with their gut feeling because this guy has done amazing things for their brand and he's still perceived by the public as someone they can relate to - he's still a fantastic person to be aligned with," he said.

"It's a decision which brands make when deciding on athletes. He'll do more for them in the long term and I'm sure this story will go away quickly."

World swimming's governing body Fina has also pledged its support for Phelps, releasing a statement which said "this great star will continue generating respect and appreciation to all fans of our sport around the globe".

"Fina certainly counts on Michael Phelps to highlight the next editions of the Fina world championships and other prestigious swimming competitions in the future."