

Nike Leans into Controversy and Wins Big

By Kelsey Miller, J.D. Candidate 2021 | September 16, 2018

Nike's stock has reached a record high a week after unveiling its new ad campaign featuring Colin Kaepernick, the former San Francisco 49ers quarterback best known for protesting racial injustice by kneeling during the National Anthem ceremony preceding NFL games.

Nike unveiled the [ad](#) on September 3rd, releasing a portrait of Kaepernick's face overlaid with, "Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything."

Kaepernick began kneeling during the Anthem in 2016. Since, many have either vehemently denounced his form of protest or rallied to support his message. President Trump [weighed in](#) at an Alabama rally in September 2017, calling Kaepernick a "son of a bitch" and urging the NFL to fire him.

After opting out of his contract with the 49ers in March of 2017 and becoming a free agent, Kaepernick remained conspicuously unsigned despite his widely recognized talent. Kaepernick [brought suit](#) against the NFL in November in an ongoing case alleging collusion.

In the first day of trading after the ad's release, Nike's stock [dipped](#) nearly 3%, leading many to think Nike had bet wrong by going all in with Kaepernick. But other sports brands—including Nike's rival, Adidas—[fell by similar margins](#), proving an industry-wide dip. Nike's sales have since skyrocketed, with its stock closing at a record \$83.47 on Thursday.

To explain the boon, many have pointed to Nike's young and urban customers, noting Nike's [long history](#) of "selling rebellion." Others, even if fundamentally aligned with Kaepernick's message, have decried Nike's [commodification of protest](#).

Kaepernick's protests aimed to ignite conversation about America's structural racism. The ensuing controversy has only amplified Kaepernick's message. Nike has taken a page from Kaepernick's book, leaning into the controversy it is sure to have anticipated, while ultimately achieving increased visibility. Not only is the move smart business, it's right on brand.

