

Nike

ABOUT

Category:

Apparel – sportswear

Owner of the brand:

Nike, Inc.

Key competitors:

Adidas, Reebok, Under Armour, Puma

BRAND STRATEGY ANALYSIS

Brand essence

Bringing inspiration and innovation to every athlete* in the world.

(*If you have a body, you're an athlete)

Brand values

Inspiration, innovation, perseverance. determination.

Brand character

Powerful, confident, encouraging, motivational, for everybody, high-tech.

Dominating archetype



The Hero

EVIDENCE

Comments

1

Before Nike became one of the world's most admired brands and the largest global sportswear company, it started as a small, niche business called Blue Ribbon Sports. Founded in 1964 by Bill Bowerman and Phil Knight, the company initially sold Japanese sneakers made by Onitsuka Tiger (the predecessor to ASICS) to professional athletes in the US. It was renamed Nike and began producing its own shoes only after its partnership with Onitsuka Tiger ended in the early 1970s.

2

Nike became the bestselling sportswear brand in the US for the first time in 1980, surpassing Adidas. It has maintained this position ever since, with the exception of two years. In 1987 and 1988, Nike lost its lead to Reebok, which gained massive popularity during the first wave of the fitness and aerobics boom in the late 1980s. Although this was a challenging period for Nike, the strategic changes introduced at that time laid the foundation for both its quick recovery and long-term growth. This was when Nike launched two of its most significant milestones: the Air Max line and the first "Just Do It" campaign.

3

The idea that everyone is an athlete (“if you have a body, you’re an athlete”) had been part of Nike’s philosophy since its early years. However, it wasn’t until the late 1980s, when the company faced growing competition from Reebok, that this belief became central to its brand strategy. The “Just Do It” campaign captured and amplified this democratic view of sport, helping Nike connect with a broader audience and extend its appeal beyond professionals to everyday people. This shift is widely credited with helping the company recover from the late-1980s crisis and maintain its leadership ever since. It positioned Nike as the brand of choice not only for sports but also for everyday wear, contributing to the rise of the athleisure trend.

4

Nike defines its mission as “bringing inspiration and innovation to every athlete in the world”, with the annotation that “if you have a body, you’re an athlete”². For years, it has consistently told the story of overcoming weakness to achieve greatness. The main villains in this story are procrastination, lack of willpower and laziness, while the definition of winning isn’t acquiring a trophy but being persistent enough not to give up and to overcome one’s own excuses (“Anyone can find excuses to stop. Find a reason to keep going”³).

5

Although some of Nike’s campaigns have a light-hearted and humorous character, the brand’s message is firmly rooted in overcoming obstacles. That’s why Nike primarily collaborates with athletes rather than non-sporting celebrities or influencers, with a few exceptions such as Kanye West, Drake, Megan Thee Stallion and Kim Kardashian’s SKIMS.

In recent years, as sports brands have rethought how they talk about performance and pressure, Adidas toned down its approach with the “You Got This” platform, aiming to ease pressure on younger audiences and bring joy back to sport. Nike, on the other hand, initially doubled down on its competitive mindset with “So Win”⁴, before softening its stance in 2025 with “Why Do It?”⁵ – a campaign recognising that today’s athletes face increasing pressure and encouraging them to focus on self-belief and the courage to start, rather than the need to win.

6

In recent years, Nike has struggled commercially, which most analysts attribute to several self-inflicted factors. First, Nike's aggressive move in the early 2020s to a direct-to-consumer (DTC) model under then-CEO John Donahoe (encouraged by strong Covid-era online sales) led the company to terminate long-term partnerships with major wholesale retailers such as Foot Locker and Macy's. This opened the door for emerging competitors like On and Hoka to gain traction. As Nike focused on driving traffic to its own website and apps, its marketing priorities shifted toward performance marketing at the expense of long-term brand building. The company also lost several key creative people, due to restructuring. Combined with frequent discounts to meet short-term targets, these factors diluted brand equity and eroded Nike's premium positioning, making consumers less willing to pay full price. Currently, under the leadership of veteran executive Elliott Hill, Nike is refocusing on brand building, restoring key wholesale relationships and renewing its commitment to product innovation.

7

Nike is a textbook example of a Hero brand, as its entire narrative revolves around courage, perseverance and triumph over adversity. It celebrates struggle and resilience, inspiring people to silence excuses and "just do it".

Tagline

"Just do it"

Official brand statement

"Our NIKE, Inc. Mission:

To bring inspiration and innovation to every athlete in the world*

* If you have a body, you are an athlete.

At NIKE, these words guide every aspect of our work and have for over 50 years. They are our rally cry to serve sport and create the future for the athletes* of tomorrow.

From our support of Joan Benoit Samuelson, who won the first women's Olympic Games marathon, to our



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work powering the future of youth sport, our mission helps make athletes'* dreams real. Every audacious moonshot to create more sustainable products and every step forward in building a responsible supply chain is rooted in our conviction that a better future lies on the other side of serving athletes* as only NIKE can.

Focus Areas

Today, our mission comes to life through key focus areas: We work to ensure each NIKE employee and future talent has what they need to succeed. We are redefining sport for the next generation, so all youth have an opportunity to play and achieve their greatest potential. We are innovating and scaling more sustainable solutions to help protect our planet. And we champion a transparent, responsible supply chain so people can thrive."6

Interesting facts

The iconic tagline "Just Do It" was coined in 1988 by Dan Wieden from the agency Wieden+Kennedy. He was inspired by the final words of convicted murderer Gary Gilmore, who reportedly said "Let's do it" before his execution.

Phil Knight, who co-founded Nike in 1964, is still the company's chairman emeritus.