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Brian Williams: Laughter May Be the Best Medicine for His Brand

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Brian Williams is probably out of the nightly news business. NBC just suspended its top anchor for six months for fear that more claims of “misremembering” will continue to erode his credibility. Luckily for Williams, he has not only been selling the evening news—he’s been selling the Brian Williams brand.

Viewers choosing a nightly world news experience tune into their preferred brand with the same brand loyalty they exhibit when buying their favorite breakfast cereal. They’re making a brand choice...it’s deliberate and it’s personal. Until now, the Brian Williams brand of “Nightly News” stood on pillars of trust and reliability. Those pillars have crumbled, but there’s more to the Brian Williams brand than that.

Williams has endeared himself to fans with his witty cameos on the sitcom *30 Rock*, successful hosting of *SNL*, entertaining late night talk show appearances, and downright hilarious representation in Jimmy Fallon rap mashups. It’s this other persona—this news anchor turned funny guy—that might give him the chance to salvage his career.

We’ve recently seen how a personal brand can survive on SOME of its pillars when others crumble – namely Tiger Woods. When personal scandal broke, Tiger immediately lost contracts with Accenture (“Go Be a Tiger” campaign) and Gillette (“The Best a Man Can Be” campaign). These sponsorships relied, in part, on the perception of Tiger the man –strong relationship with his dad, never in the news for the wrong reason, family man. When this perception broke down, these types of endorsements evaporated.

In contrast, Tiger continued his sponsorships with Nike and Rolex regardless of personal scandal, because they were leveraging his brand pillars of elite athletic performance and precision execution. His indiscretions happened off the golf course - and in that context we were able to look beyond Tiger the man and still connect with Tiger the iconic athlete. In 2013, just a few years after the scandal broke, Tiger was back as one of the highest-paid athletes.

In the wake of the Brian Williams scandal, many supporters have been struggling to defend him in spite of his indefensible acts. NBC is cautiously waiting this out, as opposed to a swift final decision they might make in the case of a more junior offender.

Williams is being granted this latitude because although his brand pillar of trust has collapsed, the pillars of wit, warmth, intelligence, and as we’ve discovered more recently, engaging storytelling, remain intact. It’s what makes his current headlines disturbing – fans KNOW he has to go, they just hate to see it happen. If Brian plays this right, he could still have a career in front of the camera – just not delivering the evening news.

The trust in Brian Williams, the news anchor is gone – but if he is true to the rest of his brand, this seemingly career-ending debacle may not be his undoing. This does not have to be “goodnight”.