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## INDUSTRY INTERVIEW

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# Interview With Rolf Meyer, CEO, No Limits for Licensing

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Rolf Meyer is the CEO of No Limits for Licensing, an international consulting firm based in Germany that provides complete strategic licensing, brand and patent brokerage, and cobranding services for clients in a variety of industries including professional sports. Before founding No Limits for Licensing, Meyer worked with a number of major international brands. Having graduated from Palm Beach Atlantic University, his first exposure to licensing was marketing inventions for the Dow Chemical Group. From there, he joined the Falke Group in Germany, where he was responsible for internationalizing their portfolio of licensed brands such as Hugo Boss and Esprit. Meyer continued to gain experience working with large international brands when he later joined the Schiesser Group, also based in Germany. It was there that he was charged with increasing sales of brands such as Puma, Polo Ralph Lauren, and Levis. As he gained experience Meyer soon began to realize that many of the licensees and licensors were unhappy with the way their brands were being handled and developed. He saw the need for a consulting business that would focus on providing services throughout the whole creation of a strategic licensing alliance, and not one that simply brokers brands. From this vision No Limits for Licensing was formed.

**Walsh:** How did you approach building the No Limits for Licensing brand?

**Meyer:** My idea was to build a “Whole-istic” license consulting firm. Our goal is to support clients from the idea all the way to the creation of a licensing portfolio and follow it until this relationship ends many years later. We strongly focus on finding partners who share the same beliefs in strategy, quality, pricing, international expansion, etc. While a 100% match is unlikely, we work on getting both sides on the same track in order to keep expectations in line. This way both partners are comfortable with one another, even on a personal level, which is also very important for the success of the licensing partnership. Once we have established the relationship we stay involved, ensuring that both partners remain focused.

**Walsh:** An emerging area of focus in sport is that of entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial sport brands. In particular, it is suggested that entrepreneurs have to sometimes engage in what some might consider unique or unconventional

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approaches to building their brands because of a lack of resources and recognition. Do you agree with this, and could you comment on the various strategies you might suggest that entrepreneurial sport brands employ?

**Meyer:** Here in Germany we have a highly successful company that created a strong licensing business. The company started as a restaurant on the remote island of Sylt, where celebrities happened to meet and party. From there this company ended up as one of the best-known brands in all of Germany, called Sansibar. Asked how he did it, the entrepreneur said, “If I knew how I had done it, I would do it again.” This is my experience with many successful brands today. Often pure luck and being at the right place at the right time lay the groundwork for successful ventures. But putting luck aside, if somebody has an idea that is unique and sometimes unconventional, one of the main reasons for success is certainly that they stick to their project with a clear focus and a long-term strategy in mind. Also, from my personal experience, if you believe in what you do and present customers with your story then success is easier. The second you do not believe in your story anymore means that clients will stop believing in it, as well.

**Walsh:** One recent area of focus for your company is what you call “sleeping brands.” Could you explain what those are and what type of impact you feel they may have on the sports industry?

**Meyer:** Sleeping brands are brands that at one time were very successful but during the course of time have lost their focus and, worst case, ceased to exist. Nevertheless, somebody has the rights to those trademarks and consumers still have strong feelings about these brands. Here it is our job to find the essence of the brand and what made it successful. From there we go out and if the owner of the brand does not want to invest, we find partners who would take up the tradition and invest in bringing the brand back to life. Maxfli golf clubs would be such a brand. They used to be in every pro shop and still have a strong fan base, but today, I cannot find them anywhere.

**Walsh:** What do you feel are the greatest challenges and opportunities currently facing licensed sport products?

**Meyer:** The enormous variety of brands in the market and the fact that many strong brands are trying to gain sales potential by entering into other sports are certainly challenges. To be successful one has to have the right story and be determined to stay with it for a long time. Short-term success is very rare. Without those attributes the product is just one in a million and the success rate is near zero. Another factor is certainly timing. There are always times where buyers are not ready to take anything new into their retailers’ offering. At that stage the product has to be really unique and special to even get a chance.

**Walsh:** In recent years, many U.S.-based and international sport properties have focused on extending their brand into new markets using tactics such as strategic partnerships, as evidenced by the New York Yankees and the Chinese Baseball Association’s partnership, international licensing programs, corpo-

rate sponsorships with global corporations, and an increase in international competition and media coverage. What strategies and media forums do you feel are most effective for building a brand internationally?

**Meyer:** The prime factor for building a strong international sports brand in my opinion is TV. This is also why TV stations tend to spend billions on rights for exclusive transmission of sports events. For example, in Hong Kong soccer has a strong following, but Asia does not have the premier teams that you might see in England, for example. The Premier League started tailoring toward these markets with exhibition matches, presentation of stars such as David Beckham, offering of fan merchandise, and sometimes even new kickoff times that would make live coverage possible. This has resulted in about \$2.8–3 billion in revenue for the Premier League clubs, where the last team in the English League table will generate income in the amount of around \$50 million per year just from TV rights. In comparison, in Germany such lower ranked teams probably generate around \$15 million in total revenue.

Due to their marketing strategies, the Premier League generates about 40% more in TV revenue than the next competitor, which would be the Italian Serie A. In general this means that the English teams have far more financial backing than all other European teams, simply because they expanded their business to Asia and other parts of the world before anyone else decided to do so. Today, through the use of TV, the Premier League basically dominates the European football scene.

**Walsh:** What would you consider to be the major differences in marketing a product in Germany/Europe and in the United States?

**Meyer:** Focusing on sports merchandising, Americans are always proud to present their colors. Meaning geographically in the U.S. there is a very diverse fan base. You can always find 49er fans in Florida or Yankee fans in LA, and everybody accepts your choice. In my opinion this is the biggest difference. In the U.S., teams have a potential of 20–25 million fans or consumers, whereas in Europe 2–3 million is a very large fan base.

Another difference is that in Europe people are far more passionate, sometimes to an extreme, about their teams and therefore think very regional. There are very few teams that have a fan base outside a 50- to 100-mile radius around town. Take London, for example. The population amounts to about 7.6 million for greater London. In this city you have five Premier League soccer clubs and another two that play in the second division. Simple math shows that their following, if really big, is probably less than 1 million fans or consumers of merchandising. In addition, in the U.S. a lot of people root for several teams while in Europe all concentrate on one. This is based on the fact that European football seasons tend to be a full 12 months, with sometimes two matches per week, if your team plays internationally. In the U.S. the seasons are much shorter, have a lot more games per week, and therefore there is more space for different sports. This also gives them the opportunity to gain fans and create sales of licensed product.

Also, Europe still has deep cultural differences that make it difficult to expand your brand. Generally speaking, expanding a successful German brand to France is very difficult if you cannot create a French story around it. Even though Europe potentially has 350 million consumers, in most cases the real consumer base is much smaller because of the cultural differences.

**Walsh:** Could you comment on the impact that the global economic climate has had on the way you and your clients approach their branding and licensing decisions?

**Meyer:** Fortunately, our customer base has not been hit as badly during the current economic crises because they follow long-term strategies, meaning they anticipated lows and created enough resources during the high times. Therefore our clients still follow the strategic path of licensing their brand, but at no rush. These companies want to make sure that the partners they choose are the right ones and create income for them on a long-term basis. Since this matches No Limits for Licensing's strategy, as well, during the past months our customer base has grown rapidly, while most others seem to have lost customers.

**Walsh:** Many have argued that more than any other time period the focus of sport properties in this decade has been on building their brand to ensure long-term success. Over the next 10 years do you feel that this will remain a focus, and what changes do you anticipate seeing in brand management and licensing?

**Meyer:** This is a very difficult question to answer. Who would be able to predict what the world will look like in 3 years? Certainly though, brands that will have created the right story around themselves and a sound long-term strategy will be the winners. Companies that are only thinking from quarter to quarter are usually also the ones that will suffer in their long-term development.