

Believe in something, says Nike. But what?

Whatever else the Kaepernick ad is, it's a symptom of the confusion that characterizes our cultural moment.

By [Ryan Dueck](#)

September 6, 2018

So it seems Nike's new 30th anniversary ad campaign featuring former NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick is causing a bit of a stir. Kaepernick is, of course, famous for his decision to kneel during the U.S. national anthem before a football game to protest police brutality and racial injustice. Kaepernick has been unable to land an NFL job since then. He is currently pursuing a grievance of collusion against the league and its owners who he says are keeping him out of the league because of their displeasure with his protests and his politics.

At any rate, [the Nike campaign contains an image of Kaepernick with the following line](#):

Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything. Just do it.

Predictably, this has had a rather polarizing effect (is there any other kind of effect that something can have in the digital age?) out there in the world—everything from breathless affirmations of celebrity support to people burning their Nike shoes or cutting the famous swoosh out of their apparel. Kaepernick's anthem protests have been a lightning rod for a variety of issues in these politically charged days—everything from the nature of patriotism to racial justice to the limits of free speech—and this ad campaign certainly seems poised to ratchet things up another notch.

My interest, perhaps predictably, is with the line in the ad itself. *Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything.* It sounds pretty courageous and

admirable, particularly if you're inclined to generally agree with Kaepernick's politics, which I am. But of course, if we actually move beyond the emotions that the image and the words have been engineered to stir up in us and analyze the words themselves, things descend into incoherence rather quickly.

Believe in "something"? Like what? Anything? Alt-right white supremacy? That the earth is flat? That our chaotic cultural moment has been engineered by Russian bots? That professional football should be banned due to its contribution to brain injuries? That pro sports in general is an idolatrous expression of a cultural sickness? That polygamy ought to be allowed as a concession to individual freedom? That Jesus Christ will come again to judge the living and the dead? I'm guessing that there at least a few things that Nike isn't terribly interested in people believing, no matter how much we're willing to lose for believing them.

And what about the "Even if it means sacrificing everything" part? Surely, we don't have to think *too* hard to come up with examples of people who have lost everything—even their very lives—for beliefs that we would not be anxious to validate. Suicide bombers come to mind as the most obvious example, but there are all kinds of people who have lost family, friends, money, status, jobs, reputations for believing in things that many of us would consider certifiably insane. Being willing to sacrifice everything for your beliefs isn't necessarily the most reliable indicator of the merits of said beliefs.

Believe in something, even if it costs you everything. Well, yeah, maybe. Sometimes. I guess it depends on the beliefs. The Nike ad is, of course, a symptom of the confusion that characterizes our cultural moment. *Believe whatever you want as long as you believe it sincerely. And as long as it fits within the boundaries of what is deemed socially acceptable by the drivers of mass media.* I suppose that's a bit clunky for a billboard.

I'm probably expecting too much (accuracy and consistency) from an advertising campaign slogan. Nike is selling athletic apparel, for heaven's sake, not trying to pass an exam in an introductory logic course! Except, well, they're *not* just trying to sell stuff. Advertisers shape and reflect public consciousness in ways many of us are probably barely aware of. So maybe it's not so bad to occasionally take a step back and say, "You sure about that? Is that *really* what we want to say?"

Originally posted at [Rumblings](#)