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Lance Armstrong's Biggest Offense  
by [Denise Lee Yohn](#)  
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If the rumors turn out to be true, Lance Armstrong will soon confess to using performance-enhancing drugs.

This admission is a tragedy for many, including his fans, the supporters of the Livestrong Foundation (the organization he founded to "unite, inspire and empower people affected by cancer"), his cycling team



mates, the U.S. Postal Service and Tailwind Sports which sponsored the team he rode with while allegedly doping, and his friends and family. Each of these will no doubt feel angry, disappointed, sad, and in some cases vindicated.

But because of my profession, I can't help but think that the news has got to be outright offensive to the folks at Nike. Up until very recently, the company ardently supported Lance. Other brands that had sponsored Lance had cut bait much earlier, but Nike held on.

Although Nike paid Lance about \$40 million for his endorsement through the years, the company's support for Lance was more than your typical brand sponsorship. Nike helped the LIVESTRONG Foundation raise \$80 million through merch sales and programs like the Nike Team LIVESTRONG. The company even named a building at their Beaverton headquarters after him.

As evidenced by its relationships with other athletes like Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods, Nike doesn't "sponsor" athletes as much as it partners with them. Together, brand and athlete create innovative products, to influence cultural movements, and to inspire people around the world. They form an uncommon, enduring bond with athletes.

Two years ago, Nike spokesman Derek Kent explained why the company was standing by Armstrong: "Our relationship with Lance remains as strong as ever. We are proud to work with him in cycling and to support his foundation. Nike does not condone the use of banned substances and Lance has been unwavering on that position as well."

It seemed Nike really believed – and believed in – Lance, even when he adamantly denied the doping charges. But now, it seems Lance lied – and betrayed the trust of his most visible, most powerful, most loyal supporter. It's his biggest offense.

I can only hope that Lance's lack of integrity won't damage the Nike brand. I hope Nike won't be discouraged from standing by the other athletes it supports. Its unwavering commitment had been admirable – a brilliant example of what great brand partnerships are about. And I hope Nike customers will understand that the company's not to blame for believing Lance, and they will continue to look to the brand for inspiration and integrity.

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**Denise Lee Yohn** Denise Lee Yohn has been inspiring and teaching companies how to operationalize their brands to grow their businesses for over 25 years. World-class companies including Sony, Frito-Lay, New Balance, and Jack In the Box have called on Denise, a brand-building expert, speaker, and writer.

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## comments

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