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INSIDE SUBWAY'S SUPERSTAR-STUDED REFRESH CAMPAIGN

Tom Brady, Stephen Curry, Megan Rapinoe and Serena Williams are new faces of the brand, which also has a new celebrity voice



By [Jessica Wohl](#). Published on July 13, 2021.



Credit: Subway

It's game time for Subway.

The sandwich chain is attempting a comeback with the backing of superstar athletes hyping Subway's major overhaul in a series of ads that seemingly never end.

The "Eat Fresh Refresh" campaign debuts today as Subway tries to recover from seven consecutive years of sales declines, exacerbated by the pandemic upending the restaurant industry, as well as pressure from smaller chains that have taken a huge bite out of its market share with everything from trendy food to speedy delivery.

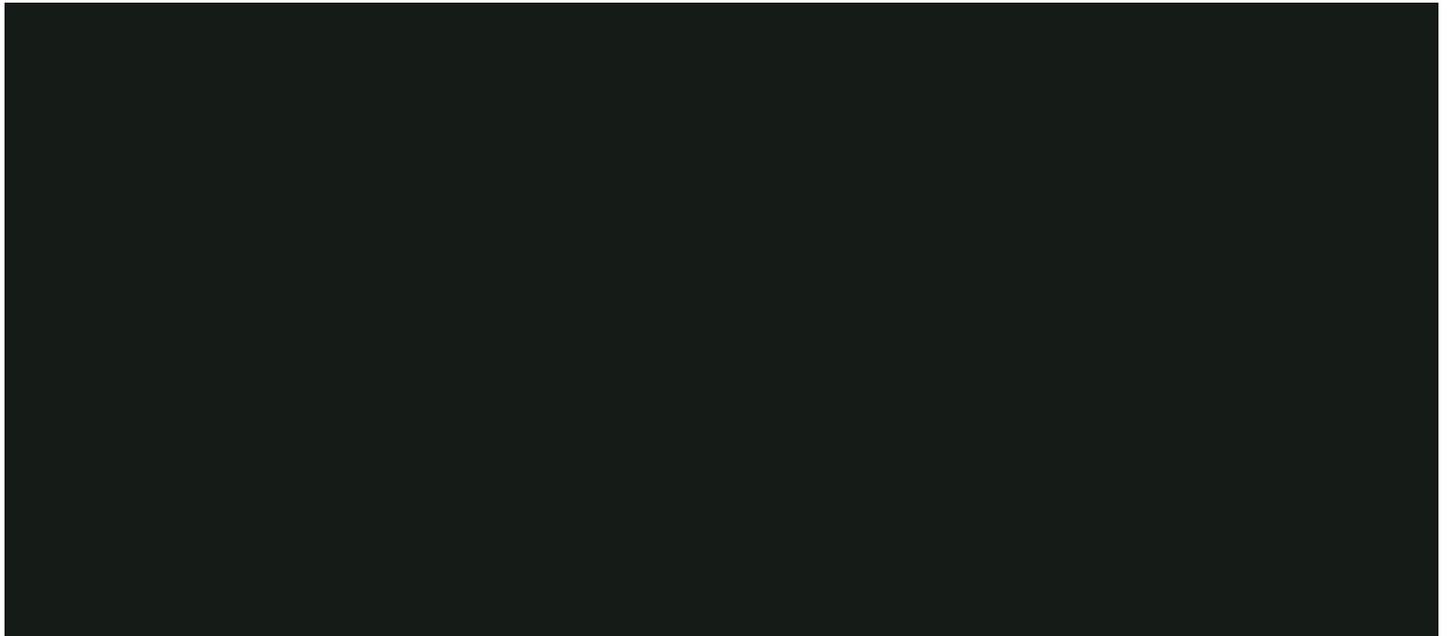
A week after announcing its overhaul, Subway is out with lots of advertising to back it up. The campaign starring Tom Brady, Stephen Curry, Megan Rapinoe and Serena Williams represents one of Subway's largest media investments to date, if not its biggest

ever. If those names weren't enough, voiceover work from Charles Barkley ties many of the ads together.

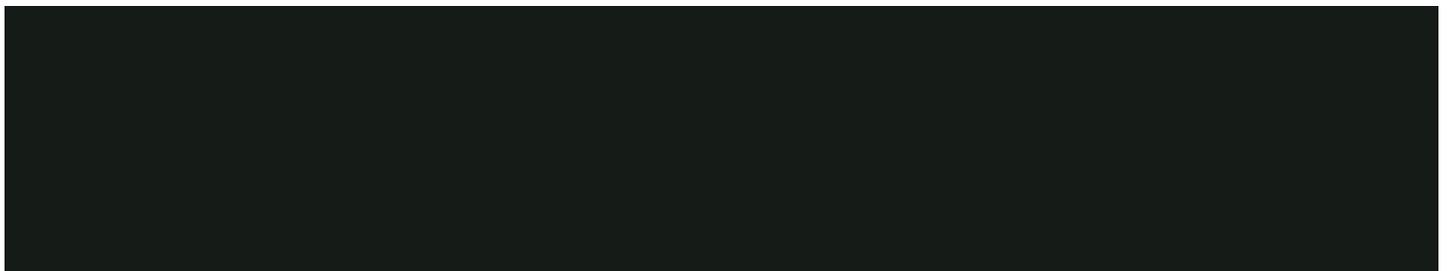
"The news is exciting and the campaign needs to be big and bold to support it," says Subway Chief Marketing Officer Carrie Walsh.

Each of the main "It's Too Much For One Spokesperson" commercials features at least one of the superstars discussing Subway's refresh and continues into the next.

Curry takes the lead in the initial spot.

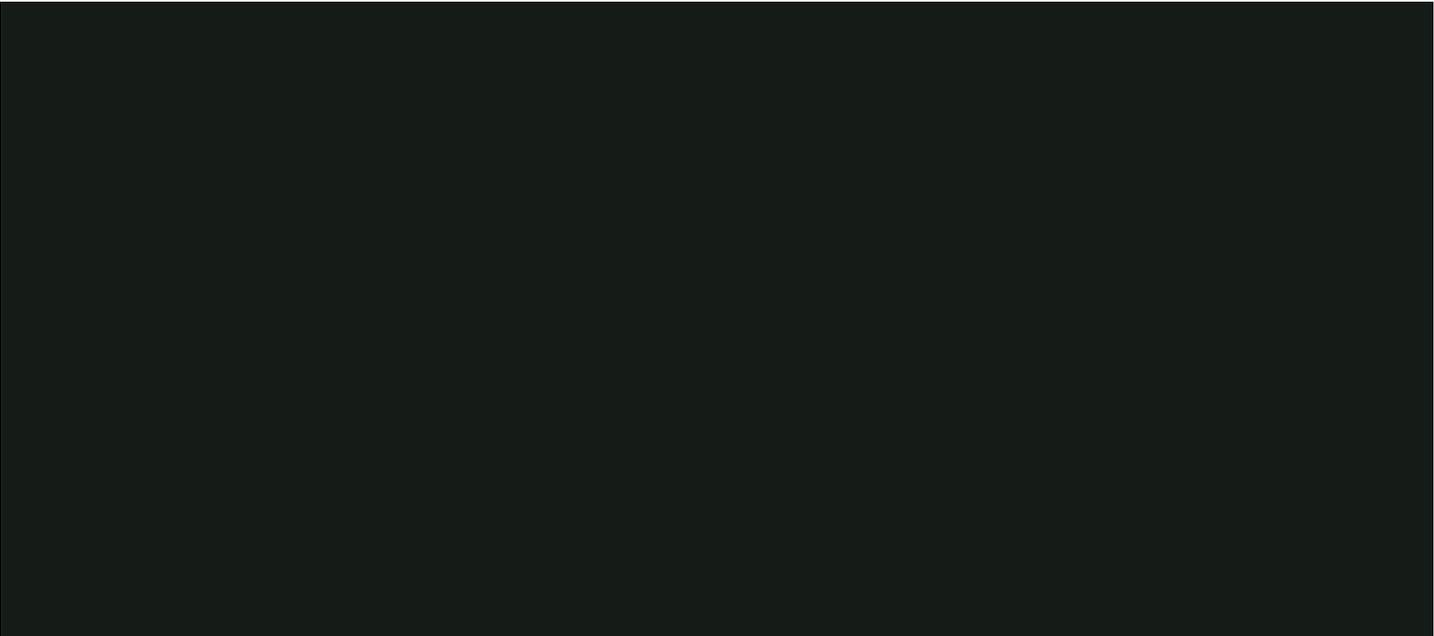


The basketball star is also seen in the second spot, as is Williams, who Walsh says shot her segments while in France preparing for this year's Roland-Garros tennis tournament. They're joined by Nancy Silverton, a famous baker who consulted on the new bread.

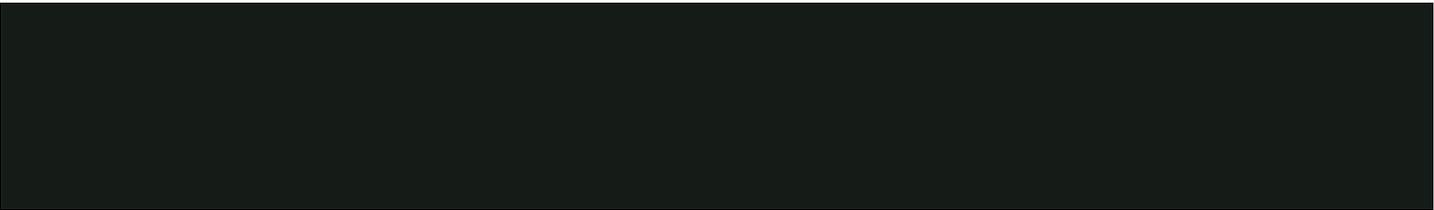


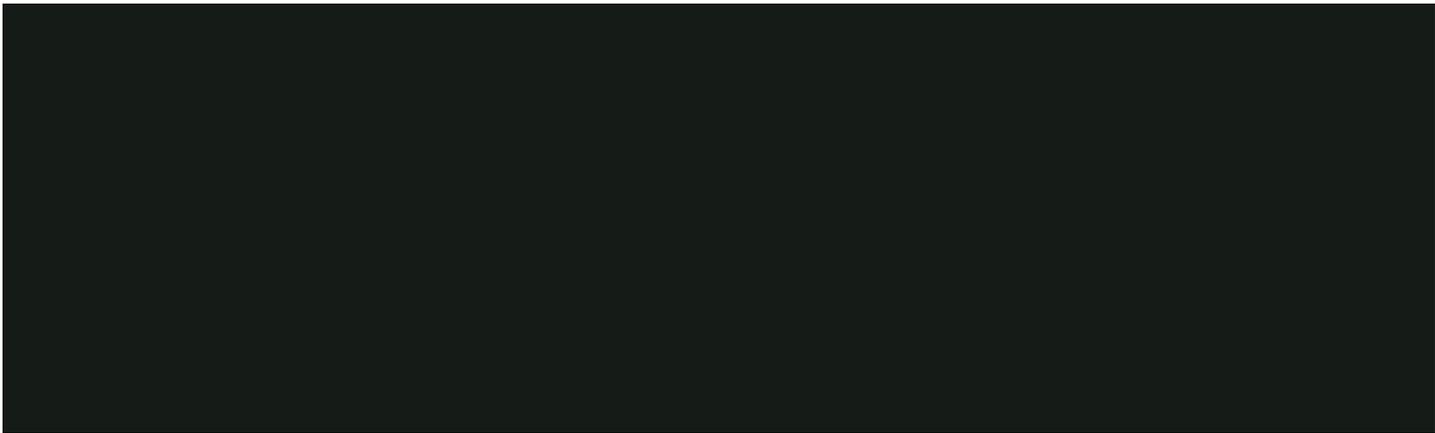


At the end of one spot, Curry asks Brady if he even eats bread. “Steph, it’s a commercial,” Brady deadpans.



And, yes, Subway even found a way to shoot down rumors about whether its tuna is really 100% tuna.





The campaign includes creative work led by Dentsu's McGarryBowen, media planning from Carat and activation supported by Current Global, Jack Morton, Proof Advertising and United Entertainment Group.

“What we've been doing is really focused on reclaiming their fresh positioning and giving them a bit of attitude,” says Ida Rezvani, chief client officer, Dentsu.

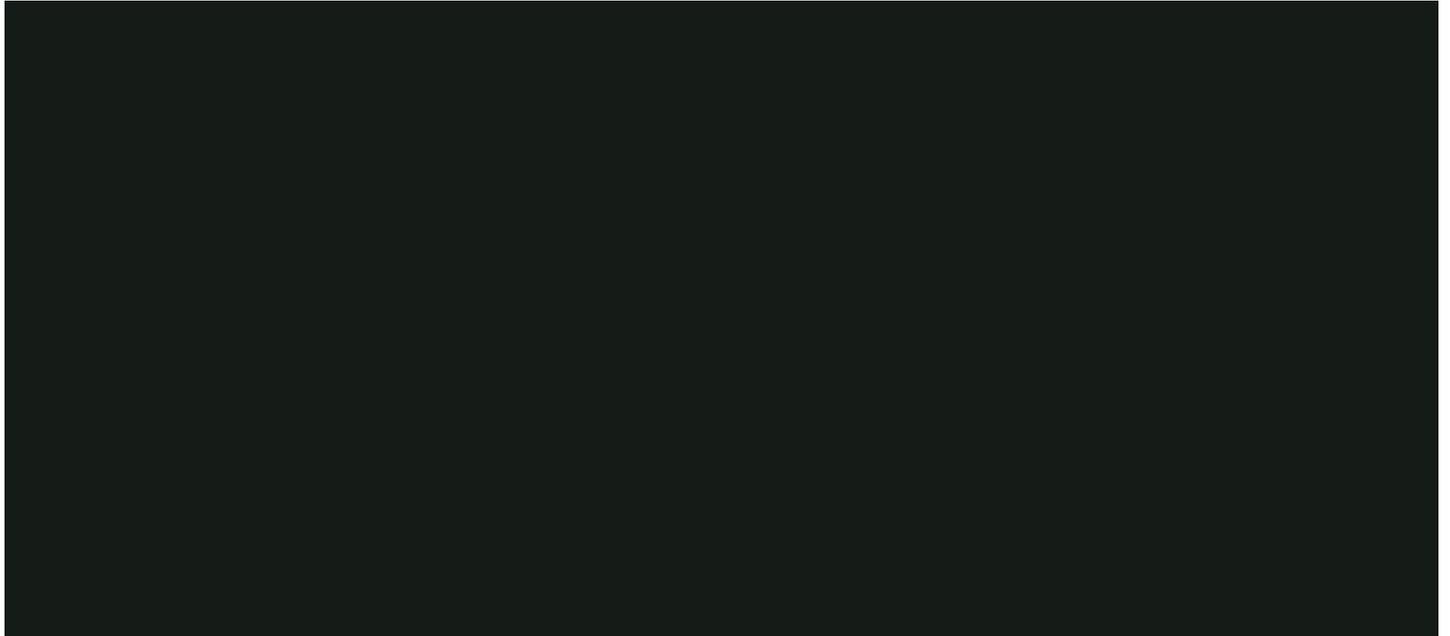
Subway has long shown athletes in its marketing. The chain's multiyear sponsorship of the National Football League began a year ago. It has leaned into football with campaigns such as New England Patriots Coach Bill Belichick promoting “footlong season” in 2020 and Marshawn Lynch hyping protein-packed options earlier this year. Subway has featured athletes from other sports as well, including National Basketball Association players Draymond Green and Jayson Tatum.

Rapinoe, one of soccer's biggest stars, began appearing in Subway ads earlier this year. Now, the “Eat Fresh Refresh” marks the first time Barkley, Brady, Curry and Williams are working with Subway as the chain leans into its role as fuel for athletes in a much bigger way.

Each TV commercial and online video featuring the stars seems to get cut off, as if there's too much changing at Subway to fit into a 30-second, 15-second or 6-second spot.

“It's the most substantive sweeping change the restaurant has ever made for the guest experience,” says Matt Ian, executive VP, DentsuMcGarryBowen. “How do you talk about that? How do you cram that all in? We needed a device that could accommodate that.”

In all, hundreds of pieces of content were produced.



The ads debut today, as Subway adds items such as deli-sliced meats and Belgioioso fresh mozzarella to the menu after shutting down roughly half of its U.S. restaurants early last night to prepare for the overhaul.

Subway is trying to regain the chunk of its lead in the industry that has been chipped away by the likes of Jimmy John's, Jersey Mike's, Firehouse Subs and other chains inside and outside the sandwich category.

Walsh declined to share specific sales data, citing Subway's position as a private company. But a large percentage of the chain "is comping very favorably to 2019," she says, "We want to build on that momentum with this launch."

As for the competitive nature of the sandwich space and the broader restaurant industry, Subway aims to occupy "a very distinct and ownable" piece of the category with its fast and healthier options, says Walsh. "We do think the brand can kind of live in a sweet spot that bridges the category," she says.

Members of Subway's MyWay Rewards program have been getting messages about the

coming changes over the last few days, including an email sent Monday with the words “big changes are coming” and a countdown clock.

“I wonder if the company will be as bold and innovative in its marketing approach as it is in its product and operations,” says Denise Lee Yohn, a brand leadership expert and author of books including “Fusion: How Integrating Brand and Culture Powers the World’s Greatest Companies,” who had not seen Subway’s new campaign. “It really needs to make a statement—do something out of the box.”

She suggested Subway needed a massive push, something along the lines of Domino’s Pizza Turnaround, a risky 2009 campaign in which the pizza chain acknowledged its product was inferior as it set out to change it, or such as when Starbucks closed its stores for a few hours in a February 2008 reboot. “Both efforts worked in getting people’s attention and demonstrating how serious the companies were about changing,” she says. Subway will have to do something as breakthrough and convincing.”

Major media buy

Subway was the 133rd largest U.S. advertiser in 2020, falling from the 109th spot in 2019, according to the Ad Age Datacenter. The chain’s media spending has fallen as sales declined. Like other franchised restaurants, Subway’s marketing and media budget is derived from fees collected from franchisees based on their sales.

Now, Subway is poised to spend even more as sales appear to be recovering. The budget for the “Eat Fresh Refresh” was not disclosed but Walsh calls it one of the biggest, if not the biggest ever, for Subway. It includes significant spending across sports properties such as the Olympics.

“It’s a more integrated and bigger campaign than they’ve done before,” says Dentsu’s Rezvani. “We’re going to be surrounded by it.”

The media spending is backed by the company’s existing franchise advertising fund. In early 2020 Subway moved to have nearly 95% of its media dollars collected from franchisees earmarked for national spending, up from 75%, helping fuel such investments.

“If the marketing is effective, it could get customers in the door and nothing turns around restaurants quite like improving sales,” wrote Jonathan Maze, editor-in-chief of Restaurant Business, in a newsletter earlier this week.

The stars shown in the slate of new spots were chosen since they have each in some ways refreshed their sports and their careers. All four were on the agency’s wish list when the planning began. “We didn’t expect to get them all,” says Ian.

As for Barkley, Walsh says Subway has not yet determined whether the former NBA player turned analyst will be seen in the campaign. For now, he’s only heard.

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