

Slap on the wrist for Power Balance bracelets



By [Roger Hislop](#)

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Skirting the line between truth, fiction and a bitch slap from the advertising regulator - the ongoing Power Balance bracelets scenario is a great case study in finely crafted messaging, of the art of spin, and discipline in damage-control PR.

Power Balance of Orange County, California, may or may not make a band that makes you stronger and more flexible, but it certainly is a fine example of consistency power and messaging flexibility.

Let's backtrack a bit. Power Balance is the makers of R500+ rubber bracelets with a hologram inset, "are designed to work with your body's natural energy field" to increase strength, balance and flexibility.

Phenomenally advanced

The company has poured tens of millions (how many is unknown outside of its plush offices) of dollars into a phenomenally advanced and successful marketing campaign, centred around pro-athlete brand ambassadors: South Africa's rugby's Rory Kockott, soccer's Gordon Gilbert and 20 or so other local sports heroes. OK, so not quite A-listers, but how about Shaquille O'Neal, Rubens Barrichello, David Beckham...

Recently, the company had to publish a humiliating admission in Australia after a [ruling](#) by the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC), reading in part:

“ In our advertising we stated that Power Balance wristbands improved your strength, balance and flexibility. We admit that there is no credible scientific evidence that supports our claims and therefore we engaged in misleading conduct in breach of s52 of the Trade Practices Act 1974. ”

The Interwebs lit up - last week Tuesday, 4 January 2011, it was the second highest trending story on Twitter. Major newspapers got in on the act, with headlines such as "[Power Balance bracelets are 'no better than a rubber band': A-list accessory maker forced to give refunds by advertising watchdog.](#)"

Sceptics came out in droves

The sceptics came out in droves, clucking and tutting and smugly saying, "See? Told you it was a scam. And not even a new one." The sceptics sites [went to town](#), with many already hosting large amounts of information about how these hologram bracelets are sold using an old parlour trick that was adopted by the magnetic bracelet people, then the applied

kinesiology people (see [here](#) and [here](#)), combined with a bit of placebo effect.

Power Balance itself has gone into full damage recovery mode - but very, very carefully. A survey of its various international sites (including Facebook) shows it's pulled in its horns in some of the more outrageous claims, and done some delicate scalpel work to make claims more weasel-worded.

The [Power Balance Facebook group](#) erupted with critics, and Power Balance, which (according to claims in various forums) previously used to discretely remove critical comments, has left them very much alone, but either spontaneously or through concerted behind-the-scenes efforts, has fired up the believers camp, who in varying degrees of scathing dismissal, ranged from "It worked for me, so who cares about your 'evidence'" to "There'll always be people hating on things they don't understand."

Skirting a fine line

Power Balance has also flooded forums with statements affirming its confidence in its "technology", although if you look carefully, you can smell the feverish spin-doctoring - and skirting a fine line between saying good stuff, and making actual firm claims.

Its formal statement: "From its inception, Power Balance has lived and thrived in the ultimate testing environment, the real world. Power Balance is committed to every athlete in the world from professional to recreational. We have heard from fitness professionals, athletes, coaches, personal trainers and everyday users who tell us they have experienced benefits from Power Balance for themselves, their clients and teams..."

Nice work! The "real world". ie not formal or independent testing environments that the authority demanded. "Committed to athletes" - what's to argue? "We have heard from" ... because while the plural of 'anecdote' is not 'data', real-life testimonials do sound so compelling.

Local response

I asked the local Power Balance importer, SPT, what its response was locally, and it is tightly disciplined, cleaving perfectly to the party line: "To date we have been responding to the customer emails and enquiries as they arise. We have also been in close contact with our authorised retailers this week. We will meet with our PR firm in the next few days to address our response in the social media channels."

With regard to the Oz ruling, the statement from SPT was on-message: that you have to use it to see it for yourself. "In Australia, Power Balance provided numerous actual consumer testimonials supporting the wristband's performance before voluntarily agreeing to remove specific marketing phrases from advertisements until Power Balance could provide the ACCC with evidence to meet their narrow criteria of randomised, double-blind scientific study."

It should be noted that the ruling in Australia is not binding anywhere else, and the company is full steam ahead... "The ruling from the ACCC does not have any effect on regions around the world, though Power Balance does work hard to share lessons and best practices from one market to many others. Power Balance always strives to be fully compliant with any country regulations and will work to ensure that all markets are aware of the concerns in Australia."

No palpable trace of irony

Hilariously and with no palpable trace of irony, despite having to admit publicly that there is no hard evidence of any sort that the bracelets work, the SA distributors asked that I include the following statement: "Power Balance's rapid growth has led to counterfeiters and re-sellers and we are therefore keen to ensure that our products are not confused with imitation products that have saturated the market in recent months, many of whom have, and continue to, make irresponsible and unfounded claims about their supposed efficacy and results."

The powerful engine of Power Balance marketing rolls on, and over the next weeks we will see if the Australia ruling has an effect, if well-crafted PR does its magic, or if this is the beginning of the end, where more countries start to look hard at the claims made by these products, and start to clamp down.

The balance of power is precarious.

For more:

- Google News Search: [Power Balance](#)

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