

## How Shaq enlisted as the first pitchman for The General

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Published June 27, 2016

Shaquille O'Neal's new endorsement deal with The General insurance brand could be described as a "top-down" arrangement. Still, Shaq had a big part in the arrangement.

It all started when The General's parent company, American Family Insurance, hired Shaq through agency IdeaQuest, as a speaker for a company gathering last year. As part of the arrangement, Shaq dined with AFI Chairman and CEO Jack Salzwedel. When the conversation inevitably turned to insurance, Shaq professed not to know much about the business but did express some affection for The General, a down-market insurance brand, which he used during his college days.

When Salzwedel informed him that AFI purchased that brand in 2013, Shaq started singing the jingle and imploring the CEO to be in its ads. Other than The General animated character, the brand never used a celebrity endorser.

Apparently, Shaq can be as convincing at the dining table as he used to be in the paint, because TV ads featuring Shaq and The General will debut next month across a multitude of cable networks.

The ads were shot at Turner's Atlanta studios in late April.

The multiyear deal marks the first time Shaq has backed an insurance brand.

"Shaq cuts across so many demos; he has high recognition and likability," said Andrew Martin, The General's senior vice president of marketing, adding that more ads will be shot in September and January. "As a down-market brand, we'd like to see the trust in our brand increase across all [demographic] sectors, and we feel Shaq will help there also."

The 7-1 Shaq interacts with the pint-sized General, and we're told he even attempted some jingle singing during the shoot. However, it's uncertain whether that crooning will make the final cut for the two ads, which were still being finalized last week.

Martin acknowledged that his company was considering a NASCAR team sponsorship when "Shaq fell into our lap. After we met with him and [agent] Perry Rogers, it just seemed right."

Rogers added, "If you look at what Shaq's done with [affordable athletic] shoes, this is a very similar play."

Rogers said he's also looking for Shaq hookups in the financial services, quick-service restaurant and snack categories to match his long-term deals with Chattem (Icy Hot and Gold Bond brands); Turner (a new five-year extension begins this fall); Arizona, which markets various Shaq-branded beverages; and Reebok, which sells Shaq footwear.