

LEAD

## Roger Federer Was the Steve Jobs of Tennis

How blending excellence with experience, and function with form, can transcend utility to make a lasting impact. [🔗](#)

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Roger Federer. Photo: Shi Tang/Getty Images

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● I was watching the U.S. Open a decade or so ago in an airport lounge when out of nowhere the man next to me said, "Roger Federer is the Steve Jobs of tennis."

I looked at him, puzzled. "Seriously," he said. "Apple products don't just work. They're classy. They're elegant. They make you *feel* something."

"That guy," he said, pointing to the TV, "isn't just a tennis player. He's like an Apple product. He's an experience."

It took me a minute to get it, but he was right. Federer played with a grace that belied his power and athleticism. Federer didn't appear to run. He glided. Federer didn't appear to twist. He gracefully pivoted.

Federer? He made the incredible look effortless.

So did the first iPads and iPhones. Before Jobs, the average tech product screamed "designed by engineers." Jobs's obsession with design combined function and form to create an experience that transcended utility. Even the process of unboxing – then relatively new, now prevalent even among mundane products – evoked a feeling of class and elegance.

Apple products made you feel something.

So did Federer. So, of course, have other athletes. Usain Bolt: delight. Michael Phelps: awe. Serena Williams: respect (on a number of levels).

Rafa Nadal's relentless hustle and grind make me want to work harder.

Federer? His poise and presence made me want to work smarter, especially since his achievements transcend tennis.

Sure, prior to his recent retirement, he won 103 singles titles. Twenty major titles. Was the number one player in the world for a total of 310 weeks, 237 of them in a row. Earned \$130 million in prize money.

But off the court he's earned over \$870 million in endorsements, partnerships, and other business pursuits. That's also because of the

way Federer makes many people feel, ticking every marketing box:  
Credibility. Excellence. Trustworthiness. Reliability. Product-marketer fit.

Put me in a Rolex ad, and you'll wonder who lent me the watch. Federer?  
In a Rolex or Mercedes ad? Seamless.

And then there's this.

Brooks Robinson, long retired, forever remained my mother's favorite  
baseball player. Johnny Unitas, even longer retired, forever remained my  
father's favorite football player. Years from now, many will still consider  
Roger Federer their favorite tennis player.

To them, tennis will still be Roger Federer.

Just as to millions of people – even though the company's market cap has  
grown from \$300 billion to nearly \$2.5 trillion since his death – Apple is  
still Steve Jobs.

That's what happens when function and form seamlessly blend. That's  
what happens when experience transcends utility.

That's what happens when a tennis player isn't just a tennis player.

And when a product or service doesn't just fill a need, or solve a  
problem, but also makes you feel something.

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