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The Demise of Native American Mascots: It's Time to Do the Right Thing

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Abstract

Purpose
The intent of this article is to show why the use of Native American mascots, logos, and nicknames by sports teams perpetuates depictions that are perceived as harmful and racist by Native Americans.

Design/methodology/approach
This article examines data from published research, personal correspondence, and essays by Native Americans so that non-natives can understand the issue from the native perspective. It also calls into question previous communication efforts that may have limited the voices of Native Americans.
Findings
By examining the meaning of warriors and other cultural symbols for Native Americans and by exploring the different views of sports between natives and non-natives, the article shows why it is unacceptable to ignore the native voice. It also demonstrates that it is possible for a sports team with a native identity to successfully change its brand image.

Practical implications
Marketers, consumers, owners of sports teams, universities, and members of outside organizations can be better informed as to why Native Americans have asked for an end to this practice. Marketers can also understand why the objections go far beyond political correctness and are part of a human rights issue.

Originality/value
The article helps stakeholders understand why privileging a revenue stream over the impact on human rights is an example of misplaced marketing.

Keywords
Native Americans, Sports, Logos

Five professional sports teams and a number of universities and high schools in the US continue to use Native American mascots and nicknames, despite intense disapproval among Native Americans, calls for legislation to ban their use, and an investigation of 30 schools by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (Adyanthaya, 2005). Although it is estimated that at least 600 schools have dropped Indian names and mascots in recent years (Wahlberg, 2004), other teams cling to them tenaciously. Universities defend this decision by claiming that dropping a Native American name that has become part of the school’s identity will alienate alumni and jeopardize donations. Though the economic aspect of the issue is real, privileging a revenue stream over the impact on human rights is an example of misplaced marketing at its worst.

Many non-natives regard the use of Native American mascots as merely an issue of political correctness. However, it is regarded by Native Americans as a blatant form of racism that promotes harmful stereotypes in a highly visible venue. The most dominant media depictions of American Indians reflect two extremes – “a villainous warlike group that lurked in the darkness thirsting for the blood of innocent settlers or the calm, wise, dignified elder sitting on the mesa dispensing his wisdom in poetic aphorisms,” according to preeminent Native American scholar Vine Deloria Jr of the Standing Rock Sioux Nation (Deloria, 2003, p. 23). Neither of the two depictions are realistic, although the villainous, warlike image is the better fit for athletic teams that want an identity tied to fierceness and aggression.

To set the record straight, Native Americans number about 2.5 million people in the US – 0.9 percent of the population according to the US Census Bureau population figures for 2000. Native Americans have lost much of the land and resources they once held, and government interventions in the past have forcibly relocated Native Americans, denied them the right to practice their religions, and prevented them from speaking their traditional languages, among other abuses. According to Native American writer Lee Francis of the Laguna Pueblo Nation, many were forced to attend boarding schools thousands of miles from home where the punishment for speaking their language was “solitary confinement in prison-like cells for weeks or even months” (Francis, 2003, p. 78). The term “genocide” is often used in writings by Native Americans to describe their treatment over the past 500 years, much to astonishment of non-natives who are unaware of the losses the native people have suffered and the intensity of emotions they feel.
A significant divide exists between natives and non-natives over the role of sports. For Native Americans, sports and other forms of competition are not about winning. Alfred Young Man, Native American scholar, writer, and artist of the Cree Nation wrote:

Sports should be about improving upon one’s moral and spiritual integrity, or fiber, above all, about testing your agility, strength, skill, talent, courage, vigor, and intelligence against that of your fellow man or woman, classmates or team ... I believe that sports should fundamentally be about learning how to gain your opponent's respect, to test and judge their mental and physical abilities and skills (Young Man, 2003, p. 200).

An understanding of this view clearly shows that applying Native American mascots to a form of competition that is all about winning trivializes the culture they hold sacred.

Some non-natives recognize that certain mascots are derogatory but believe that names such as warrior pay tribute to Native Americans and honor them. This is also far from the truth, given that so many native warriors sacrificed their lives fighting to protect the land and preserve the culture (Wisconsin Indian Education Association, 1997). Furthermore, warriors played many roles in Native American culture:

Warriors also protected the helpless, the sick, the infirm, the elderly, the young in times of strife or war. They provided food, shelter, knowledge, philosophy, mathematics, history, culture, music, art, architecture, and dance as well. A far cry from the cunning savage of Hollywood lore ... (Young Man, 2005).

Occasionally, articles suggest that not all Native Americans disapprove of Indian mascots. The logic in promoting this view seems to be that if there are few objections from Native Americans, teams should be able to hold on to their mascots – or so we are told. According to a 2002 Sports Illustrated article, it is primarily the “activists and tribal leaders” who consider Indian team names and mascots offensive and that the Native Americans in general disagree with the leaders (Price and Woo, 2002). The article cites figures from a survey that claimed that 81 percent of natives disagree that teams should stop using Indian nicknames. This seems unlikely, given that more than 500 Indian nations have voiced unified opposition to mascots through representative organizations including the National Congress of American Indians, the National Indian Education Association, and the Great Lakes Inter-Tribal Council (Harvard Law Review, 1999). In fact, a survey conducted by Indian Country Today (2001) reported that the same number – 81 percent of Native Americans – believe Indian mascots are offensive. Clearly, both surveys can not simultaneously be correct. The illogic of the numbers not only calls into question the sampling techniques but also begs for an answer to the question of what percentage of people can acceptably be offended. Even if Sports Illustrated’s 81 percent were correct, are we to believe that the opinions of the remaining 19 percent of Native Americans should be disregarded as insignificant? But the more serious question arises over the suggestion that the voice of the First Nations' leaders and activists should be ignored, apparently because their opinions are in the opposite direction of the desired response. This is all the more serious when we realize that some Native American voices have been silenced by fear as a result of threats and hate mail. Could a comparable request that the voice of African-American, Hispanic, or Asian leaders be ignored without risking enormous public outcry? Could a comparable sports team mascot depict any other racial or ethnic group without being considered “socially repugnant and reprehensible?” (Harvard Law Review, 1999).

The reason non-natives have resisted giving up the mascots is tied to extremely complex identity issues that are part of a team's brand; however, changing the brand name is not impossible. In fact, at least one marketing analyst believes that change could “turn a rebranding exercise into a complete marketing, promotional and merchandising triumph. Imagine one or all these teams announcing that racism of any type is the leading scourge of our society and, accordingly, they were replacing their offending name, logo, and/or mascot” (Siegel, 2003, p. 29).
If it is possible to make the change, why then do we continue to allow teams to resist? Why do we allow teams to hold on to racist depictions that we know are harmful? Doing the right thing would finally put Native American names and mascots in their rightful place in the graveyard of misplaced marketing efforts. It would be an example of marketing that is honorable and responsible.

References
Young Man, A. (2005), personal correspondence via e-mail, 5 October.