

Journal of Issues in ***Intercollegiate Athletics***

Giving UE a new (F)Ace

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The purpose of this study is to explore the University of Evansville (UE) brand, particularly efforts undertaken by UE directed at establishing greater brand identification, brand affinity, and brand equity through the rebranding of their mascot, Ace Purple. The mascot Ace Purple has been the face of the UE's Athletic Department for over ninety years. University officials recognized the importance in seeking the feedback from groups of stakeholders, as a university mascot is a critical piece of its marketing and branding efforts. In order to decipher stakeholder attitudes, a survey instrument was developed to assess the attitudes regarding Ace Purple held by key constituents. Six stakeholder groups were included in this analysis, including alumni, parents, students, employees and board members, donors and volunteers, and athletic supporters. The survey contained four questions which sought to determine how UE stakeholders felt about Ace Purple. There were 2,076 respondents to the survey. Descriptive statistics, Pearson's chi square analyses and logistic regression was employed to compare stakeholder group opinions. Results determined all stakeholder groups, except the alumni, supported a makeover. Employing a single case study approach, this case discusses a stakeholder-driven approach to redesigning a mascot for the purposes of enhancing an institution's and athletic department's brand image.

Intercollegiate sport plays a critical role in the life of today's American university. Institutions use intercollegiate athletics to reach key stakeholders such as lawmakers, donors, alumni, students, and parents. By presenting the university in a positive light to influential stakeholders, it's more likely that a positive assessment of what is distinctive about the university is achieved (i.e., organizational identity). This also helps create a sense that other people view the university favorably (construed external image). For example, the revenues that are important to institutions come in the form of state appropriations of lawmakers, major and annual gifts from alumni and donors, and tuition dollars from parents and students (Clopton & Finch, 2012; Toma, 2003). While scholars may disagree on the extent to which high profile intercollegiate athletics increases applications to the university or helps to improve the academic quality of the student body, there is little question that a successful college sports enterprise can increase exposure and build brand recognition (Frank, 2004). Wins and losses on the field of athletic competition are not the exclusive drivers of brand equity for an athletic department (Toma, 2003).

This study aims to explore the University of Evansville (UE) brand, and in particular efforts undertaken by UE directed at establishing a foundation for greater brand identification, brand affinity, and brand equity. This manuscript will address branding initiatives that have been enlisted at UE including the recent athletic rebranding strategies of UE athletics and the visual identity (VI) of the Purple Aces. Further, perspectives associated with brand management, university branding, institutional rebranding perspectives regarding athletic department branding, branding strategies, rebranding efforts, program development, and visual identity characteristics and revisions are addressed.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Stakeholder Theory

Freeman (1984) defined a stakeholder as “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives” (p. 46). Stakeholders are players that have a vested interest in the activities of a given organization (Ackoff 1981; Allen 1988; Benneworth & Jongbloed, 2009). According to Wu (2012) stakeholders are those who have access to power, a vested interest in the organization, ability to broker scarce resources, or other influential variables that can impact organizations. Stakeholders work with organizations to facilitate the sharing of knowledge and to generate social and economic values (Wu, 2012). Organizations that are able to satisfy the wants and needs of its stakeholders are better suited to succeed in any given market than those who do not (Tkaczynkis, Rundle-Theile, & Beaumont, 2010). These entities in a university context can include student clubs, donors, community members, employees, and students. University stakeholders often have the potential to receive either intangible or tangible benefits from the actions of a particular university (Freeman, 1984). Some groups of stakeholders leverage more influence than others based on the mission of the institution and the perceived power of the individual or group (Jongbloed, Enders, Salerno, 2007).

Stakeholders for the purpose of this study were identified by UE officials to be alumni, donors, volunteers, current students, parents of students, the Board of Trustees, university faculty

and staff, university administrators, season ticket holders, and single game ticket purchasers. Each cluster of stakeholders was invited to provide input on the rebranding process of Ace Purple. Each group had the potential to receive the intangible benefit of feeling satisfied with the university mascot which could feasibly influence future ticket sales, affinity for UE and its athletic department, and donations to the university. University decision makers must simultaneously take into account the interests of all key stakeholders.

University Branding

The public's perception of higher education institutions can function as a chief characteristic in building the brand image of academic institutions (Lee, Miloch, Kraft, & Tatum, 2008). Athletic programs regularly attract general public interest by delivering an underpinning for the establishment of general awareness for educational institutions (Toma & Cross, 1998; Toma, 2003). Given the natural visibility of athletics, the enhancement and further development of brand management strategies may be greatly improved through athletics. For many higher education institutions, athletics may be the most visible form of exposure. Branding and image enhancement are crucial aspects of sport marketing and organizational development initiatives. The establishment and maintenance of favorable brand images allow athletic departments to utilize various methods to acquire greater visibility. As the establishment and maintenance of favorable brand image is critical, athletic departments have numerous approaches at their disposal to achieve greater visibility that may have a substantial influence when recruiting potential students and student athletes, soliciting corporate partners, and facilitating development opportunities with alumni and other key stakeholders (Lee et al., 2008).

With the increasingly commercial nature of intercollegiate sport over the last quarter century, athletic departments have become progressively more entrepreneurial in nature (Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics, 2010; Smith, 2010). In turn, it is necessary to enact strategies to produce greater revenue and wider exposure to increase the matriculation of students (Lee, Gregg, Beck, Cianfrone, Keshock, & Mathner, 2011). Highly visible athletic programs can provide an additional means for facilitating greater institutional brand identification (Lee et al., 2011). The brand perceptions of colleges and university academic quality, social life, location, and cost can weigh heavily in the decision making process potential students as they decide where to attend college. Brand image can be enhanced by developing and maintaining a marketable brand image through athletics, as they are often a visible, if not the most discernible form of exposure for institutions by the general public. Successful and visible athletic programs can provide added exposure to the institution as a whole, facilitating in greater institutional brand identification. This can be seen by the presence of spectator sports, particularly football and basketball. Both sports contribute in significant ways to institutional culture by offering campuses with distinctive identities and providing associations to the student body, alumni bases, and fans locally, regionally, and across the nation (Clark, Apostolopoulou, Branvold, & Synowka, 2009; Toma, 2003; Weight, Taylor, & Cuneen, 2010).

Athletic programs have the potential to be prominent in the formation of the institutional framework for brand identification while generating distinct perceptions by the public. Exercising athletic programs as a vehicle for inaugurating relationships with stakeholders, higher education institutions are able to evoke greater awareness of institutional brand image and positively shape brand perception (Curtis, Abratt, & Minor, 2009; Toma, 2003). Intercollegiate athletics may offer a wide assortment of benefits to higher education institutions. Among these

are increases in student enrollment (including higher quality students), expanded media coverage, heightened capacity to recruit distinguished faculty, increased contributions from alumni and other school stakeholders, and increased institutional/campus pride (Beyer & Hannah, 2000; Clark, et al., 2009; Goff, 2000; Judson & Carpenter, 2005; Rhoads & Gerking, 2000; Smart & Wolfe, 2000; Wolfe, 2000). Studies such as these verify the importance of stakeholders in institutions of higher learning.

While the virtues of such approaches are present, institutions commonly enact brand management strategies lacking uniformity (DiGisi, 2004). Such shortcomings can generate impediments in university marketing efforts, while hindering differentiation strategies and impacting the overall institutional strategic vision (Lee, Gregg, & Miloch, 2012). Furthermore, branding prospects can prove to be more challenging for smaller higher education institutions, as well as those not affiliated with major athletic conferences (Lee et al., 2008; Lee et al., 2011). Such institutions routinely garner less national media exposure and attract fewer spectators than more established athletic programs—even when such institutions have established successful athletic programs respectively (Brunswick, 2005).

Methodology

Case Study Methodology

Because the rebranding of Ace Purple was a unique occurrence heavily influenced by contextual conditions, a single case study approach was employed. Eisenhardt (1989) described the single case strategy as an examination of the myriad of subtleties that influence a single organization. A general definition of case study research offered by Yin (2003) is “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident...[and] relies on multiple sources of evidence” (p. 13). Mertens (2005) added that case studies rely upon multiple sources of data that must converge in a triangulated manner.

Triangulation techniques were employed during the data analysis phase of this project to ensure accuracy of factual data collected from archived sources, interviews with key actors in the rebranding project, and results from a survey and focus group interview. While the single case study approach has been criticized for its lack of generalization, this case outlines a “best practice” in rebranding projects (Li, Pitts, and Quarterman, 2008). Other case studies addressing university rebranding campaigns provide a reference point for the activities undertaken by UE. Further, the incorporation of other theoretical frameworks in the current case is intended to compensate for any shortcomings due to a lack of generalizability (Yin, 2003).

Athletic Department Specific Case Studies

University branding articles published in recent years have included branding issues associated with notable head coaches, such as Bruening and Lee’s (2007) examination of Tyrone Willingham’s influence on the Notre Dame football program and Robinson and Miller’s (2003) examination of the hiring of Bobby Knight at Texas Tech. Other university branding endeavors including examining the nuances associated with Robert Morris University (Clark, et al., 2009) and the examination of the rebranding of Troy University (Lee, et al., 2008). Other branding coverage in intercollegiate settings has been applied to specific institutions. These include

Southern Methodist University (SMU) (Bouchet & Hutchinson, 2010), Texas A&M (using the pseudonym of “Southwestern State University”) (Hutchinson & Bennett, 2012), Birmingham Southern College (Bouchet & Hutchinson, 2011), University of South Carolina Beaufort (Nagel & McGee, 2012), and a historical case analysis of the University of Chicago (Bouchet & Hutchinson, 2010). Furthermore, this issue has been addressed in recent presentations at international sport marketing conferences, particularly those associated with university branding at smaller universities and/or universities not affiliated with major conferences (Lee et al., 2011 & Lee et al., 2012). These two studies also addressed the issues and challenges associated with the lack of football programs. The aforementioned scholarship provides insightful information associated with the significance of university brands and the specific nuisances associated with individual universities. It also further shows the relevance and contribution to the literature relevant the important area of study that is university branding.

During the 2010-11 academic year, the office of University Relations undertook a survey of UE stakeholders to solicit input on the rebranding of Ace Purple (“Ace Purple”, n.d.). Under the direction of Lucy Himstedt, the Director of University Relations, a survey was constructed using Survey Monkey software. The survey contained four fundamental questions which were designed to determine how various UE stakeholders felt about Ace Purple, what they would change about the mascot if given the chance, and sought to determine how the constituents felt about other human-like mascots such as the Michigan State Sparty, Purdue Pete, and the Notre Dame Leprechaun. Additionally, survey participants were encouraged to interject their opinions in short answer format (Himstedt, 2011). The survey was distributed during the spring term to UE stakeholders including faculty, staff, administrators, students, parents, season ticket holders, internal cabinet members, and alumni. The link to the survey was distributed via email twice during the time period. Himstedt’s office also utilized the social media sites Facebook and Twitter to alert stakeholders to the availability of the survey (“Ace Purple,” 2009; Martin, 2011a). There were 2,076 responses to the survey.

The athletic department also engaged in a six member focus group with key stakeholders including the Faculty Senate President; Student Government Association President; a former student-athlete and student trustee, the Director of Alumni and Parent Relations; the Associate Director of Enrollment Communication; and one former student athlete who was also a season ticket holder and alumnus (Himstedt, 2011). Athletic department staff members transcribed the data in order to identify themes in the responses to each question regarding the rebranding of Ace Purple.

University of Evansville History

The University of Evansville is a small, private institution with Methodist affiliation located in Evansville, Indiana. Originally established in 1854 as Moores Hill Male and Female Collegiate Institute, the university became the Evansville College in 1919. By 1967, the university underwent a second name change to become the University of Evansville. The university’s current full-time enrollment as of fall of 2012 was approximately 2,643 students, hailing from 46 countries and 13 states. Focusing primarily on a sound liberal arts undergraduate education, the university prides itself on small class sizes (14:1 student to faculty ratio) and a one of the strongest study abroad programs in the country (“UE Facts,” n.d.).

While UE has garnered national recognition for its academic programs, their athletic department has arguably provided the most national exposure. Competing in the National

Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) at the Division I level, the athletic program has received significant media attention to the success of the men's basketball team. During the 1950s, the men's basketball program experienced tremendous success under the direction of head coach Arad McCutchan. McCutchan's teams won five Division II National Championships from 1959-1970. After a highly successful career, McCutchan stepped down at the conclusion of the 1976 season. Due to their dominance at the Division II level, the athletic department elected to move to the Division I level in 1977 ("Athletics History," 2009).

One year after McCutchan retired, the UE and Evansville community experienced a tremendous tragedy. On December 13, 1977, the twin engine DC-3 aircraft carrying the men's basketball team to a competition at Middle Tennessee State University crashed shortly after takeoff from the Evansville Dress Regional airport. All 29 passengers aboard the plane, including the entire men's basketball team were killed in the crash (Berrong & La Plante, 2007). Much like the plane crash that killed the Marshall football team, as highlighted in the popular film, *We Are Marshall* (Iwanyk, & McG; 2006), the UE community received a great deal of national media attention following the crash. National support for the athletic department helped the university to rebuild their tradition of athletic excellence ("Marshall", 2006).

After decades of rebuilding, the men's basketball team regained national prominence under Jim Crews, who became the head coach in 1985. Under the direction of Crews, who had played for Bobby Knight at Indiana University, the Purple Aces made it to the National Invitational Tournament (NIT) in 1988. The following year, Crews guided the Aces to the National Collegiate Athletic Association's Men's Basketball Tournament, the most successful season since 1965 ("Athletics History," 2009). The Aces made subsequent appearances in the NCAA tournament in 1982, 1989, 1992, 1993, and 1999.

Crews' teams stood out not only for their stellar performances on the court, but also for an uncommon choice of uniforms. In honor of the successes of Coach McCutchan and the victims of the plane crash, the men's basketball team opted to wear jerseys with sleeves, which was a highly unusual uniform choice. According to Don Wade (1991) the sleeved uniforms made their first appearance around 1927. McCutchan brought the uniforms back during his coaching tenure because he believed it was what the players were most comfortable in, and because the locker room was excessively cold. McCutchan also stated in the 1975-76 media guide that the sleeved jerseys were also more flattering to thin basketball players. *Inside Sports* magazine quipped in a 1991 article that the Aces should shed the sleeves, because they were too talented a program to be known primarily for their odd uniforms; UE was undeterred (Wade, 1991).

While the men's basketball team has received the most media attention, other UE athletic programs have helped the university gain national recognition. UE's men's and women's soccer programs have both experienced great success. From 1982-1996, the men's soccer program made eleven trips to the NCAA tournament, including one trip to the Final Four. The women's soccer program also enjoyed great success during the 1990s; winning four consecutive conference championships from 1996-2001 and an additional championship in 2008 ("Athletics History," 2009).

The 1990s proved to be a tumultuous decade for UE athletics. Evansville left the Midwestern Collegiate Conference for the Missouri Valley Conference in 1993. While athletic teams enjoyed great success during the decade, the university struggled to support 16 athletic teams financially. Men's basketball attendance had been on the decline, and NCAA gender equity requirements became more stringent in the early 1990s, resulting in a budget shortfall of approximately \$1.5 million (Pointer, 1998). While UE's non-scholarship football team

(competing in the Pioneer League) had been a source of pride for the university and the community since 1898, then President James Vinson and the Board of Trustees elected to eliminate the football program. There were four distinct variables cited for the elimination of football. First, there was not a NCAA national championship specifically for non-scholarship football at the time. Second, because of the large roster size associated with football, the university would have been required to add more women's sports for gender equity reasons. Third, increased spending on the part of private colleges was required to keep up with state schools funding football programs. Finally, the university needed to update all athletic facilities in order to remain competitive with other Division I institutions. These four variables proved to be the downfall of the popular football program. The sport was eliminated during the spring term of 1998 leaving UE with eight women's sports and seven men's ("Athletics History," 2009, Pointer, 1998).

UE officials followed through with their plans to enhance athletic facilities following the elimination of the football program. Arad McCutchan Stadium, formerly the home of the football team, was redesigned as a soccer stadium for the men's and women's programs. The university also constructed facilities for its softball and baseball programs. Charles H. Braun Stadium, home to the baseball team and the James & Dorothy Cooper Stadium, the home of the women's softball team were both unveiled in 2002 ("Athletics History," 2009).

Another major development was a uniform change for the men's basketball team in 2002. After being the only Division I team to wear jerseys with sleeves since the 1985-86 basketball season, the decision was made to shed the sleeves for a more modern look. Players on the squad voted unanimously to make the change, and then head coach Steve Merfeld agreed it was the best decision for the team. In addition to the players, Merfeld sought feedback from key university stakeholders including alumni, fans, and former coaches before finalizing the choice (Engelhardt, 2002).

The UE athletic department faced another financial shortfall during the early twenty-first century. With a declining enrollment, the university struggled to support its academic programs. Providing the funds to support a Division I athletic program became hard to rationalize. President Steven Jennings publically discussed the possibility of moving the university to either the Division II or III level as a cost saving measure. A special committee was formed to study the feasibility of remaining a Division I institution. Because UE is the only Division I school in Evansville, the community was up in arms. Ultimately the board of trustees, special committee, and President Jennings decided to stay at the Division I level ("Athletics History," 2009). Some adjustments were made to streamline operations, however. After the 2001-02 academic year, the head men's tennis coaching position was reduced from a full to a part-time position. Then in the fall of the 2003-04 academic year, the decision was made to eliminate the program altogether, leaving UE with the NCAA Division I minimum of six men's and eight women's teams (Engelhardt, 2003).

Ace Purple

One of the most unique attributes of the UE athletic department is its mascot, Ace Purple. UE was originally known as the Pioneers. The Aces nickname apparently originated after Louisville men's basketball coach Fred Enke quipped to UE coach John Harmon that he had aces up his sleeves following a UE upset of Louisville 49-21. Harmon and the editor of the local newspapers' sports section, Dan Scism, both liked the sound of the Aces better than the Pioneers.

UE officially changed its nickname in 1926 (Davis, 2006). Later, a local sports artist crafted the image of Ace Purple. According to the UE athletic department website, “Ace was created in the image of a turn of the century riverboat gambler to represent Evansville’s location on the banks of the Ohio River” (“Ace Purple,” n.d.). According to John Martin (2011b), the original Ace Purple smoked cigars, carried a gun, and also toted a club with a spike on the end. Due to the negative associations with gambling, the image of the riverboat gambler was barred from the sidelines and athletic department literature until the university moved to the Division I level in 1977. Keith Butz, the creator of the Purdue Boilermakers mascot was asked to craft a mascot that personified the traits of cunning, daring, shrewd judgment, and quick wit.

Ace Purple and the University of Evansville received national recognition when *Time Magazine* compiled a list of the ten worst mascots in college sports in 2009. Ace Purple ranked ninth, trailing the University of Santa Cruz Banana Slugs and the University of Hawaii [Rainbow] Warriors, among others. Joe Atkinson, the Director of News Services for UE at the time stated that the university was proud to have gained national recognition, albeit for less than desirable reasons in the local newspaper. According to Atkinson, “The University of Evansville is proud to add this distinction from Time Magazine to the national recognition from *U.S. News & World Report*, *Open Doors*, *G.I. Jobs* and numerous other publications in 2009” (Reynolds, 2009).

Previous rebranding efforts were undertaken in 1998 when the athletic department elected to redesign their Ace Purple logo after a 40 year span. The old logo used by the athletic department featured a riverboat gambler with a mustache who wore a cap with an ace of spades protruding from a band around the hat. Athletic department had entered into discussions with university staff, alumni, and fans of the athletic program. According to Laura Tietjen, the director of athletics in 1998, it was critical to maintain the name the Purple Aces because nationally, people associated the name with the University of Evansville. While Ace Purple was retained as the mascot for the Aces, the athletic department also decided to change the color scheme to incorporate orange into marks and logos. Orange was associated with the McCutchan era at UE, and was a popular color within the athletic department. The new logo and color scheme was unveiled at a men’s basketball game on December 5, 1998 (Raithel, 1998).

This major rebranding initiative laid the foundation for further changes. A major rebranding measure occurred in 2011 when the university decided to rebrand Ace Purple. Former men’s basketball player Pieter van Tongeren (class of 2011) noticed that Ace Purple, the longstanding mascot for the UE was in need of a makeover, and expressed an interest in helping to redesign the mascot as part of his mandatory senior project. The interest expressed by van Tongeren triggered informal conversations on campus regarding the necessity of updating Ace Purple.

Survey and Focus Group Results

Six stakeholder groups were included in this analysis, including alumni, parents, students, employees and board members, donors and volunteers, and athletic supporters. A slight majority of the 2,076 survey respondents (53.6%) believed that Ace Purple needed a makeover. In examining the level of support for each of the six stakeholder groups, employees demonstrated the strongest level of support with 70.4% of employees supporting the makeover. Two-thirds of students supported the change, along with a majority of donors, parents, and athletic supporters. The only stakeholder group to have less than 50% support for the modification was alumni, who

supported the makeover at 49.7%. However, since alumni accounted for 68.7% of the respondents, it skewed the dataset, reducing the overall positive response for the makeover to 53.6%. It is important to note that one respondent could have represented multiple stakeholder groups. For example, one person could be a parent, employee, and athletics supporter simultaneously.

Table 1 - Support of makeover by stakeholder group (n = 2035)

Stakeholder	<i>n</i>	% of responses	% supporting
Employee	196	9.6%	70.4%
Student	268	13.2%	66.4%
Athletics Supporter	570	28.0%	56.7%
Parent	225	11.1%	56.4%
Donor	337	16.6%	54.0%
Alumni	1400	68.7%	49.7%

In addition to descriptive statistics, Pearson's chi square analyses and logistic regression was employed to compare stakeholder group opinions. Pearson's chi square revealed several significant differences between stakeholder groups and whether they support a makeover of the mascot. Alumni was the only stakeholder group to not support a makeover ($\chi^2 = 29.5, p < .001$), while students ($\chi^2 = 19.9, p < .001$), employees ($\chi^2 = 24.2, p < .001$), and athletic supporters ($\chi^2 = 2.7, p < .05$) supported the makeover. Logistic regression was utilized to examine the stakeholder groups that predicted whether or not the makeover was supported. The inclusion of stakeholder variables improved the ability to predict supporting the makeover ($\chi^2 = 57.1, p < .001$; *Nagelkerke* $R^2 = .037$). Employees were 2.2 times more likely and students 1.6 times more likely to support a change in the appearance of the mascot. Alumni lacked statistical significance at the $p < .10$ alpha level, but the practical significance of the results in conjunction with the significant Pearson chi square result means that alumni were 1.2 times less likely than other groups to support the makeover.

Table 2 - Summary of logistic regression analysis for predicting support of makeover from stakeholder status (n = 2035)

Predictor	β	SE β	Wald	df	Sig	e^{β}
Alumni	.242	.143	2.858	1	.091	1.273
Student	-.505	.185	7.472	1	.006	.604
Parent	-.065	.167	.150	1	.698	.937
Donor	.029	.131	.048	1	.827	1.029
Employee	-.785	.173	20.475	1	.001	.456
Athletics Supporter	-.085	.107	.635	1	.425	.918

Survey respondents were asked the question “What do stakeholders like about the current mascot?” Sixty-three percent of survey respondents answered the question “What do you like about the current Ace Purple?” Of those responding to the question, 14.9% indicated they did not like anything about the mascot, and 10.8% responded with a comment categorized as “other,” meaning it could not be determined specifically what the respondent liked about the current mascot. Of the 970 respondents that provided specific feedback on what they liked about the mascot (n = 970), the top response was the mascot’s appearance (39.4%), followed by uniqueness (25.1%), tradition (13.6%), friendly appearance (9.4%), everything (8.1%), and the gambler image (4.2%).

Table 3 - What do you like about the mascot?(n = 970)

Response	n	%
Appearance	383	39.4
Uniqueness	244	25.1
Tradition	132	13.6
Friendly	91	9.4
Everything	78	8.1
Gambler image	41	4.2

Survey respondents were also asked the question “What do stakeholders want to see changed about the current mascot?” Fifty-eight percent of survey respondents answered the question “If given the opportunity to make a change to Ace, what would you change or update?” Of those responding to the question, 15.5% indicated they did not want anything changed with the mascot, and 8.4% responded with a comment categorized as “other,” meaning it could not be determined specifically what the respondent wanted changed. Of the 1,015 respondents that provided specific feedback on what should be changed with the mascot, the top response was the mascot’s clothing, outfit and props (21.9%); head and face (12.1%); and modernizing the style and removing the old-fashioned look (11.8%). All other responses represented less than ten percent of all responses.

Table 4 - What would you like to see changed? (n = 1,015)

Response	<i>n</i>	%
Change clothing, outfit, or props	222	21.9
Change head or face	123	12.1
Modernize the style or remove old-fashioned look	120	11.8
Change the color scheme	84	8.3
Change the nickname or create a new mascot	75	7.4
Eliminate gambling motif	66	6.5
Create a less friendly character	64	6.3
Become more youthful and athletic	47	4.6
Become more active and entertaining at games	44	4.3
Return to original mascot	34	3.3
Create a more friendly character	30	3.0
Reduce confusion about what a Purple Ace is	18	1.8
Use Ace playing card as the mascot	18	1.8
Use World War II fighter pilot as mascot	15	1.5
Become more cartoon like	14	1.4
Become less cartoon like	14	1.4
Use a person instead of a suit	14	1.4
Add a female counterpart	13	1.3

Results from the focus group revealed nine key findings (Himstedt, 2011):

1. Don't lose the tradition of the Purple Ace name
2. Modernize the costume worn by the mascot
3. The mascot's head should be less cumbersome in order to increase agility of the person wearing the costume

4. The eyes in the mascot's expression should be glaring, but not leering
5. The mascot's expression needs to be reflective of competitiveness and intimidation to competitors
6. Those individuals wearing the costume should be active, animated, and not afraid to interact with the crowd, team, band, etc.
7. Replace the all-white costume with a purple jacket
8. Tie in the Purple Aces/University of Evansville mark to the costume
9. A marketing plan must be in place to raise the visibility of the new mascot on and off campus

Discussion

The Role of Stakeholders

Successful college athletic programs can increase exposure and aid in building brand recognition (Frank, 2004). More than just wins and losses drive brand equity for these respective institutions. As image is of paramount importance, institutions may wish to embark on various measures to build brand image, identity, and equity. Rebranding can be a powerful tool for athletic departments interested in increasing their brand equity in competitive environments (Branca & Borges, 2011; Aaker, 1991). Defined by Muzellec and Lambkin (2006) as a process of creating a new name, logo, or symbol for the purpose of differentiating a given product, rebranding allows the firm to adjust their brand to appeal to stakeholders. This process can range from minor tweaks to visual identity, known as evolutionary branding, to major changes to a brand, otherwise known as revolutionary rebranding (Muzellec and Lambkin, 2006).

Regardless of the size of the undertaking, it's critical to consider stakeholder preferences. Wu (2012) identified stakeholders as "those who have valued resources, vested interest, power or other influential factors that are critical to a firm's strategy or strategic decisions" (Wu, p. 162). Ultimately stakeholders cooperate with organizations to facilitate knowledge sharing and the generation of social and economic values (Wu, 2012). Certainly in the case of the rebranding of Ace Purple, the university relied heavily on the feedback of key stakeholders when making essential decisions about evolutionary rebranding project of the university mascot.

The results of the survey support making a change to the mascot while recognizing and considering the positions of the stakeholders and diehard supporters of both positions. Those who are currently engaged in the state of the university (students, employees, and athletic supporters) favored the makeover; slightly over 50% of alumni did not support a mascot makeover. Because change "is a situation that interrupts normal patterns of organization and calls for participants to enact new patterns, involving an interplay of deliberate and emergent processes that can be highly ambiguous" (Ford, Ford, & D'Amelio, 2008, p. 363), it is plausible that alumni with fond memories of the old Ace Purple were uninterested in making any sweeping changes to the mascot of yesteryear. On both sides of the debate were respondents being adamant about their position, including those who did not like anything about the current mascot and those who did not want any changes made to the current mascot. Overall, there was a lack of consensus among stakeholders regarding the rebranding of Ace Purple.

Rebranding Ace Purple

Visual identity was at the heart of rebranding Ace Purple. Changes to Ace Purple's attire, alterations in his appearance, and the creation of a more functional mascot, in addition to other logo and color concerns formed a challenge for marketers of the UE brand seeking to develop

and distinct and consistent brand. The results of the quantitative analysis of survey data echoed the conclusions drawn from the focus group. The challenge that emerged from analysis of survey and focus group data was how to modernize an iconic mascot with deep-rooted history and tradition within the institution, particularly with alumni who demonstrated the least amount of support for a change.

The focus group determined that the university needed to retain the tradition of the Purple Aces as the nickname and Ace Purple mascot. Similarly, survey respondents reported that the appearance (39.4%), uniqueness (25.1%), and tradition (13.6%) were the top reasons for liking the current version of the mascot (see Table 3). However, much like the survey respondents, the focus group concluded an overhaul was needed to modernize Ace Purple's attire. The top response from survey respondents with respect to what should be changed about the mascot was to change the clothing, outfit, or props used by Ace Purple (21.9%; see Table 4). Specifically, the focus group recommended that Ace Purple's jacket should be changed from white to purple. This recommendation was similar to the survey results that showed 8.3% of the respondents recommending a change in color scheme for Ace Purple. Lastly, the focus group suggested the UE athletic logo be integrated into the mascot in some fashion in order to ensure that the public recognizes the mascot as part of UE.

Focus group participants and survey respondents also indicated that the expression on Ace Purple's face needed a makeover. Changing the head or face was the second most cited aspect (12.1%) that survey respondents wanted to see changed about the mascot. The focus group suggested that Ace Purple should strike a balance between a glaring expression that exudes a competitive spirit and a leering expression that would be received negatively by the public. Achieving the balance between competitive and leering would allow the athletic department to appease the survey respondents who wanted the mascot to become a more friendly character ("I'm not devious") and a less friendly character ("I'm competitive and want to win").

The mobility of Ace Purple was also a concern raised by the focus group participants and survey respondents. The focus group highlighted the need to create a head for the mascot that would allow for an individual to move freely while in the costume. The previous mascot's head was quite large and cumbersome for the person inside the mascot, limiting his or her mobility and athleticism (Himstedt, 2011). Survey respondents had taken note of the same problem, indicating that the new Ace Purple should be more youthful and athletic (4.6%). By eliminating a cumbersome and awkward head, the way would be paved for the person inside the suit to interact with the crowd and be more entertaining at the games.

Additionally, the focus group acknowledged the need for congruence in the design and implementation of Ace Purple on marketing materials and costume design. This recommendation falls in line with findings in several branding studies that determined brand congruence positively affects brand perception and consumer preferences for particular products and services (Bottomley & Doyle, 2006; Erdem & Swait, 2004; van Rompay & Pruyan, 2011). University officials elected to create marketing materials to highlight the rebranded Ace Purple. Coloring pages for children, trading cards, temporary tattoos, and stuffed Ace Purple dolls were all created to welcome the new Ace Purple (Himstedt, 2011).

Implementation

The rebranding of Ace Purple was initiated by former alumnus Pieter van Tongeren who also played basketball at UE. Ultimately, van Tongeren designed the new Ace Purple. The final

product was unveiled during UE's men's basketball game against in-state rival Butler University, who was coming off back-to-back appearances in the Championship Game of the NCAA Men's Championship Tournament, on November 12, 2011. Coincidentally, the game was also the first played in the new Ford Center, a state-of-the-art-arena owned by the city of Evansville and home to the Purple Aces. Additionally, UE stakeholders were invited to attend a fan fest at a local car dealership prior to the game on November 12, where they were privy to a preview of Ace Purple. The new mascot and new arena marked the beginning of a new era for the Evansville Purple Aces (Martin, 2011b).

In the aftermath of the rebranding of Ace Purple, the mascot has appeared in a variety of locations and on print materials. Every Saturday from June to August 2012, Ace Purple appeared at community events in the Evansville area. Ace's image has also been utilized by numerous campus groups and university offices. For example, the Office of Admissions uses Ace on recruitment cards to all students accepted to the university. The Development Office uses the image on solicitations for donations from various stakeholders. Further, student organizations such as sororities have used Ace Purple on recruitment materials (Personal Communication, Liz Riffert, October 9, 2012). To date, stakeholder opinions of the new mascot have not been solicited. As a result, it's not possible to draw conclusions about stakeholder affinity for the new Ace Purple.

Limitations

The findings presented in this study are not generalizable to other institutions, as stakeholder opinions undoubtedly vary based on a myriad of variables. Further, the survey distributed to UE stakeholders to solicit feedback on potential changes to the mascot did not contain a mechanism to prevent multiple entries from single individuals. As a result, it's plausible that individuals interested in skewing the data could have submitted multiple surveys. Additionally, stakeholder opinions of the new mascot have not been measured to date. It's not possible to truly evaluate the effectiveness of the rebranding project undertaken at UE without additional feedback from key stakeholders.

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