

1-1-2018

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### Recommended Citation

Walsh, Patrick; Clavio, Galen; Ross, Stephen D.; and Blaszk, Matthew (2018) "Why Teams Rebrand: Uncovering the Motives and Process of Team Rebranding Initiatives," *Journal of Applied Sport Management*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 4.

<https://doi.org/10.18666/JASM-2017-V10-I4-9081>

Available at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jasm/vol10/iss4/2>

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# Why Teams Rebrand

## *Uncovering the Motives and Process of Team Rebranding Initiatives*

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### Abstract

While rebranding is very common in professional sport, little research has been devoted to this topic. In particular, no studies have examined the reasons why teams decide to make changes to their names, logos, and/or colors, and the process they go through while doing so. Through content analysis of public statements from teams and interviews with team executives, this study found five common reasons for rebranding, as well as recommendations from team executives for how to handle this process. Based on the results, practical implications are provided for teams who may be deciding to engage in some aspect of rebranding.

**Keywords:** *Rebranding, brand revitalization, logo change, brand equity*

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When an organization makes any changes to its brand name, logo, or colors, or a combination of those three attributes, it has engaged in some element of rebranding (Muzellec, Doogan, & Lambkin, 2003). For example, in 2014 the NBA's New Orleans Hornets changed their name to the New Orleans Pelicans, which subsequently also required new logos and colors, and ultimately led the Charlotte Bobcats to then rebrand to the Charlotte Hornets. However, not all examples of rebranding are as drastic to include changes to name, logo, and colors in totality. In fact, it has been suggested that rebranding consists on a continuum ranging from evolutionary changes to logo design and colors to revolutionary changes to brand names (Stuart & Muzellec, 2004). While the examples above would certainly classify as revolutionary rebranding, the majority of rebranding initiatives in sport would be considered to be evolutionary. For example, in recent years, many teams, such as the Detroit Lions, Portland Trailblazers, and Florida Panthers, have also engaged in various aspects of evolutionary rebranding by making changes to just their logo design or colors.

Organizations may decide to engage in some elements of rebranding to reflect any major organizational or marketplace changes, to enhance or change their brand image, or to act as a point of differentiation (Muzellec & Lambkin, 2006). However, rebranding could ultimately damage an organization's brand equity by changing what may have been years of effort in developing brand awareness and associations associated with their previous brand marks and names (Muzellec & Lambkin, 2006). As logos and colors are commonly thought to be a major component of a team's brand associations (Gladden & Funk, 2002; Ross, James, & Vargas, 2006), any change in those brand associations could ultimately influence team brand equity and how consumers respond toward the team (Ross, 2006). Rebranding is also generally a lengthy and costly process. For example, the rebranding of the Florida Marlins to the Miami Marlins took 28 months (Lefton, 2012), and it was estimated to cost approximately \$4 million for the Charlotte Bobcats to simply change a number of their marketing aesthetics (e.g., signage, website, etc.) to the new Charlotte Hornets identity (Muret, 2013).

## Background

While rebranding is a common strategy for organizations both in and outside of sport, little research on the topic exists. The majority of research outside of sport has primarily focused on defining various types of rebranding and determining why organizations decide to make changes to their name, logos, and/or colors (Muzellec et al., 2003; Muzellec & Lambkin, 2006; Stuart & Muzellec, 2004). The limited research attempting to explain how consumers react to changes in company logos found that consumers who are highly committed or loyal to that particular company generally react negatively to changes in brand logos (Walsh, Winterich, & Mittal, 2010; 2011), while research also contends that new logo designs will give the association of a brand being more modern (Bolhius, de Jong, &

van den Bosch, 2018; Muller, Kocher, & Crettaz, 2013), more distinctive (Bolhius et al., 2018), and the perceived attractiveness of a logo and familiarity with the logo will impact attitudes towards the brand, and ultimately brand loyalty (Muller et al., 2013).

In sport, even fewer studies on rebranding exist. Of note, Ahn, Suh, Lee, and Pedersen (2012) examined how team logo changes impact fan attitudes toward the team's brand and purchase intentions of team merchandise. They determined that fans with higher levels of team identification, or connection to the team, generally reacted negatively to changes in team logos, yet those same highly identified fans still had positive intentions of buying team merchandise (Ahn et al., 2012). More recently, Agha, Goldman, and Dixon (2016) examined how different types of team name changes in minor league baseball impacted attendance and merchandise sales. They found no positive increases in attendance due to name changes, yet did find a decrease in attendance for teams that abandon local team names (i.e., team names that are relevant to that particular city/region), while there was some evidence that a rebrand to a team name with ties to the region could have an impact on merchandise sales (Agha et al., 2016).

While research has begun to examine some elements of rebranding in sports, why professional sport teams decide to engage in rebranding has yet to be examined. As brands are an important asset for organizations, any changes to a brand's identity is an important strategic decision for industry professionals (Daly & Moloney, 2004). As such, it is important to first have an understanding of the driving forces behind these rebranding decisions. In addition, no research to date has examined the actual process teams engage in order to provide key learnings for future team rebranding decisions. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine rebranding of professional sport teams from the perspective of the executives involved in the rebranding process to better understand why they engage in rebranding initiatives and how they approached the rebranding process. Doing so will provide industry professionals with information they can use when making decisions on how to rebrand their organization and what key items they could consider throughout this process.

## Method

In order to understand why professional sport teams engage in rebranding, the process they go through, and potential outcomes, a content analysis of secondary data along with semi-structured interviews with team executives was utilized. Prior to conducting this analysis, it was first necessary to identify which professional sport teams have engaged in some element of rebranding. Utilizing the website [sportslogos.net](http://sportslogos.net), which catalogs logo changes of sport teams, it was determined that a total of 63 teams from the National Basketball Association (NBA), National Football League (NFL), National Hockey League (NHL), and Major League Baseball (MLB) have engaged in either evolutionary or revolutionary re-

branding from 2010 until present day (i.e., May 2018 at the time of writing), which represents 51.2% of the teams in each of the four leagues combined. This included 10 NFL, 14 MLB, 14 NHL, and 25 NBA teams that have engaged in some element of branding during this time span. As a name change in major professional sports is uncommon, the majority of these teams would be classified as having engaged in evolutionary rebranding ( $n = 57$ ) while the remaining six teams engaged in revolutionary rebranding with a name change, most often also accompanied by logo and/or color changes (i.e., Florida Marlins to Miami Marlins, New Jersey Nets to Brooklyn Nets, New Orleans Hornets to New Orleans Pelicans, Charlotte Bobcats to Charlotte Hornets, St. Louis Rams to Los Angeles Rams, and San Diego Chargers to Los Angeles Chargers).

Following the identification of examples of rebranding, and similar to the method of Muzellec and Lambkin (2006), available articles from trade publications, newspapers, league and team websites, and press releases from these teams were examined to determine the publicly stated reasons for why the teams decided to rebrand. In total, 68 unique articles from 49 of the 63 instances of rebranding during this time frame were available and found by searching available archives on team websites, media outlets (e.g., espn.com, league websites), and popular databases and search engines (e.g., Nexis Uni, Google). In instances where the same stated reasons for rebranding by individual teams were found in multiple sources (e.g., the same quote by a team executive used by multiple media outlets/articles) only one source was used. These stated reasons for rebranding in each of the articles were then examined and a content analysis of the text was conducted to develop common themes present throughout (see Saldana, 2009). Following this analysis, an additional quantitative content analysis was conducted to determine how frequently each of the themes were mentioned as reasons for their rebranding.

In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with team personnel who had a leading role in the rebranding of their organization. As previous branding literature has used interviews with personnel from two to four teams (Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005; Richelieu & Pons, 2006; 2009; Walsh & Lee, 2012), this study had a target sample of four interviewees. The targeted interviewees were chosen as each had reached the highest level in the organization's marketing function and specifically led or were part of the executive team which led the rebranding process. Specifically, those interviewed included the chief marketing officer of an NFL franchise, vice president of marketing for a NHL team, senior vice president of marketing for an MLB franchise, and the chief marketing and sales officer for an NBA team. In addition, the teams chosen were a mix of both evolutionary and revolutionary rebranding examples in order to get representative feedback from different types of rebranding initiatives. Given there are so few examples of revolutionary rebranding, which interviewed teams engaged in which type of rebranding will not be identified to protect individual and team anonym-

ity. The interviewees responded to eight questions on a variety of topics in order to understand what changes they made to the brand, the team's goals and objectives as it related to their rebranding, the process the team went through while making the change, any potential fan reactions to the changes in the brand, the impact rebranding has had on the team's business, and each interviewee was given the opportunity to discuss anything they felt was relevant about their rebranding initiatives that was not covered in the interview questions. Each interview was conducted via phone, was recorded to allow for transcription and coding to take place, and lasted between eight and 17 minutes. While it may be a concern that interviewees may not completely reflect their reasons for rebranding, each interviewee was told that the interviewee's name and the team name would remain anonymous to encourage candid responses. Each interview was transcribed to allow for coding during the content analysis. Specifically, first and second cycle coding was conducted in order to develop categories or themes that emerged for each of the questions (see Saldana, 2009 for a description of content analysis and coding). For the purpose of anonymity, the four executives interviewed will be referred to as Participant A, B, C, and D.

## Results

The content analysis of articles to uncover why teams rebranded unveiled five common themes: *nostalgia*, *regional pride*, *modernization*, *fan feedback*, and *re-birth*. What follows below are brief examples of information from articles that represent information leading to the development of each of the themes, and additional information gained from the interviews with team executives. In addition, the numbers and percentages noted in the sections below represent the results of the quantitative content analysis, thus indicating the number of teams that referenced elements of the respective themes as reasons why they engaged in rebranding.

### Nostalgia

A number of teams ( $n = 29$ , 59.18%) felt they needed to reconnect to their team history (i.e., *nostalgia*) by developing a logo or utilizing colors that were reminiscent of those the team used in the past. For instance, the Toronto Maple Leafs indicated that they wanted to restore the Maple Leafs to a "proud and prominent place" with a classic logo representative of their championship legacy. In addition, the Atlanta Hawks' rebranded logo is a more modernized version of the logo the team used from 1972–1995; just one example of the many teams who have rebranded by using a historic team logo and/or colors (e.g., Utah Jazz, Detroit Pistons, Buffalo Sabres). This theme was also present in the interview results as Participant B indicated that "we have this heritage that we want to celebrate and positive things that are associated with it," while Participant A stated that they "are an iconic brand so what we saw was an opportunity to go back to our iconic past from a color standpoint, and that the goal and objective of the rebranding was

to make sure that we were anchored in our past but reflective of our clear brand positioning.”

### **Regional Pride**

Many teams ( $n = 26$ , 53.06%) also discussed the need to connect to their city and have incorporated names, colors, and/or logo designs that attempt to connect to the region and display their *regional pride*. For instance, the Toronto Blue Jays added a symbolic Canadian image of the maple leaf to their most recent logo which was also meant to highlight that they are the only Canadian team in MLB. When the Florida Marlins became the Miami Marlins, the colors in their logo were meant to be representative of the flair and liveliness of Miami. The Miami Dolphins also rebranded with colors that were meant to represent South Florida and have an authentic connection to the area. Their two-tone aqua and aquamarine colors are meant to represent the tropical water famous to the area. The NBA's Golden State Warrior's primary logo was also designed to connect to the region by incorporating an element of the Bay Bridge which represents the team's Bay Area connections. In the interviews, Participant B noted that one of the reasons they made changes to their logo was they wanted to embrace their state and have a more regional appeal. Participant A also discussed this by indicating that they went back to colors that were more representative of their environment and their region, while participant C indicated that they wanted to “create a compelling brand and to really position ourselves as a team from [their city not just their state].”

### **Modernization**

During the content analysis it became clear that teams felt they needed to *modernize* their brand ( $n = 21$ , 42.86%). With advances in design technologies, oftentimes a team's brand mark may simply be outdated and in need of a more modern look. For example, when the Carolina Panthers updated their logo, they indicated that the new logo was a modernized version with a more contemporary and three-dimensional look needed for the digital era as compared with of the previous logo. The Minnesota Timberwolves also suggested that the blue and green colors used in their redesigned logo were a modern take on those colors when compared to the colors used in their original logo. Participant D also mentioned that they “needed to make sure we acknowledged the past while evolving the brand and looking to the future,” while Participant C also mentioned that they wanted to “reintroduce a new, more energetic, more contemporary, more compelling brand.”

### **Fan Feedback**

Another theme present was that teams listened to *fan feedback* calling for a new identity or had responded favorably to different types of team branding initiatives ( $n = 21$ , 42.86%). Some teams simply referenced that they listened to fan feedback through various forums such as surveys or focus groups, while others used

fan response to actual merchandise and apparel as a catalyst for their rebranding initiatives. For instance, the Cleveland Cavaliers stated that fans responded so favorably to retro merchandise that the team decided to rebrand and permanently use the wine and gold color scheme that had previously been part of the team's brand from 1970–1983. The Golden State Warriors also saw such success with their throwback merchandise that they designed their new logo with a similar design and colors. The team executives interviewed also indicated that conducting research with their fans was critical to their rebranding success. For example, Participant A stated that “Research is critical, and we wanted to hear what our fans were saying,” while Participant B indicated that they spoke with their tickets sales reps to take into account what feedback they were getting from their season ticket holders as it related to their teams brand. Participant A went further to say that you need to be aware that “it’s the fans that own the brand and we wanted to make sure that we honor the fact that it’s the people’s brand.”

### Rebirth

The theme of *rebirth* was uncovered as some teams ( $n = 18$ , 36.73%) rebranded in order to represent a new era for the team due to franchise relocation, team performance, ownership, and other organizational changes. For example, the Houston Astros went through major rebranding initiatives when new ownership took over the team in 2011, while the Minnesota Twins noted that moving into their new stadium was the ideal time to make changes to the uniforms and logo. Conversely, the Florida Panthers wanted to move away from the image of being a team that has never won the Stanley Cup, and indicated that their new logo was a fresh start that represented a new era of team success. Participant B also indicated that their initial reasoning for their rebrand was they had a new owner who wanted a change, but that it “was also symbolic of a kind of new start, a fresh start.” They went on to state further that they also adopted a new slogan that was symbolic of this idea of a fresh start.

### Additional Interview Results

In addition to supporting the themes found in the content analysis of the secondary sources, the interviews uncovered additional information that may be helpful for industry professionals to understand as it relates to rebranding. All of the executives interviewed indicated that despite what they believed would be a negative response, initial fan reaction to the changes in the brand were very positive. They have also noted that the changes have positively impacted their brand equity, and each of the teams enjoyed a significant increase in merchandise revenue due to the rebranding. For example, Participant C noted that “At one point last season we were number one in cap and jersey sales,” while Participant B said, “One of our challenges this season was getting enough merchandise in here, especially jerseys, because fans were so excited.” However, it was cautioned that an increase in merchandise sales should not be a driving force in the decision to rebrand and

the team's brand positioning should be the primary consideration. For instance, Participant A said, "Don't do it just to sell more stuff. Make sure you are clear on who you are as a brand before making any changes."

Another important practical finding from the interviews was that the executives felt it was very important to maintain control over the process. Participant C highlighted this by stating, "If you don't control the process and it leaks and it gets out in a way you don't want, you're not going to get the reaction you hope for." Participant D also felt this was important and indicated that "How information is released, when and to who is critical."

## Discussion and Implications

This examination provides the first known evidence of why professional sport organizations decided to rebrand, the process they took, and the potential outcomes associated with rebranding. Results suggest there are common reasons why professional teams have engaged in rebranding, and that most teams are making the decisions from a brand positioning perspective. While each team will have unique circumstances to consider, for professionals in the industry this information may be a useful starting point if their organization is determining whether or not to engage in some element of rebranding.

The five themes above may provide teams with some initial discussion points as it relates to their own rebranding. For example, for teams who feel they need a fresh start but are unsure of the direction they want to go with their rebrand, they may use these themes to think about ways to incorporate regional aspects into their new logo or color scheme (i.e., *regional pride*), or they may wish to do a historical analysis of their previous brand marks to determine what past color palettes may be best to utilize (i.e., *nostalgia*). A team may decide that its current brand mark and colors need updating with new design features (i.e., *modernization*), or perhaps simply want to reset the organizations brand position to represent a new beginning (i.e., *rebirth*).

It should also be noted that many teams incorporated several themes into the rebranding of their organization. For example, a team may wish to update its logo with a fresh, new design (i.e., *modernization*) while at the same time incorporating some elements that might connect to the team's history (i.e., *nostalgia*) or something relevant to the region (i.e., *regional pride*). In this example, doing so would allow the team to incorporate the three themes in one logo design. While future research would need to determine which types of rebranding initiatives are most successful and garner the best fan feedback, based on the responses from the interviewees and the article analyses, a combination of the noted themes may be thought to provide for a greater chance for success.

Another consideration is that any rebranding will likely require a significant amount of costs, both in terms of time and finances. Given the patience and resources required while engaging in rebranding campaigns, it would be wise for

organizations to have a well-established plan prior to embarking on any repositioning strategies. Because rebranding could potentially damage the positive awareness and associations of brand names (Muzellec & Lambkin, 2006), it is important to have a logical plan in place to ensure changes create advantageous associations.

Whichever direction or theme(s) that a team decides to use in its rebranding initiatives, the results of this study suggest that incorporating the fan base into the decision-making process, and/or conducting research with fans is crucial to the ultimate success of any rebranding initiative. From a practical perspective, this might suggest allowing fans to vote on new brand names and logo designs, or conducting surveys, focus groups, and interviews to determine what team brand associations are held, why they are a fan of the team, and what they would like to see in any rebranding of the team. Another interesting practical finding is that some teams decided to rebrand after there was a great fan response to their retro apparel and merchandise, providing another potential approach to rebranding. As opposed to completely changing their brand identity, teams could first test or tease new logos or color schemes to gather some fan feedback. However, when incorporating fan feedback into the decision-making process, it will be important for the team to remain in complete control of the process to ensure that brand messaging and positioning is properly communicated to its target audience. Any non-team approved leaks, or even unsubstantiated rumors regarding the rebranding, could ultimately make it difficult for teams to control their own message.

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