

What The NFL Did Wrong and What It Should Do Now



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Today's consumers expect a brand to not only offer the best in quality but also to share their values. The consumer buys into the perceived values of a brand as much as they do the products or services of the brand. That is why the NFL made a major mistake in its response to President Trump over the issue of players kneeling during the national anthem.

The latest public relations war in the Trump presidency all started when President Trump was at a campaign rally in Alabama for Luther Strange, and Trump, as he is apt to do, went off script and began talking about NFL players kneeling during the playing of the national anthem and said NFL owners should fire those players. The NFL responded criticizing Trump and talking about the first amendment rights of the players. Sunday's NFL games saw an unprecedented protest with players and owners linking arms during the playing of the national anthem, numerous players kneeling during the anthem, and some teams refusing to come out of the locker room until the national anthem finished playing.

All of this was supposed to demonstrate that the NFL is united against any infringement of the rights of its players. The NFL is running a commercial called unity to symbolize the unity in the face of Trump's criticism.

Remember the NFL brand was already damaged with domestic violence scandals, 'deflategate", player concussions, and the initial kneeling during the national anthem during the 2016 – 2017 season. This was reflected in declining viewership and attendance. This latest controversy just escalates the damage to the NFL brand further and causes many fans to question if the brand stands for their values.

What did the NFL do wrong?

1. Respond to President Trump at all. Yes, in this 24/7 news cycle and social media driven world, brands feel a constant pressure to respond. Yet responding to President Trump when he goes off script or on a Twitter rant, actually seems to reinvigorate him and further escalate a controversy. It actually as we have seen time and again plays into his hands. And unlike other politicians, President Trump has shown again and again that he doesn't care what these battles might do to his poll numbers, while the brands under attack must worry about what it will do to their brand image. The best response to President Trump is to ignore him or poke fun at him.

2. Not have a simple answer on what they are protesting about. To be effective and capture public sympathy, the reasons for the protests and actions must be simple. Nobody knows what the players and owners were protesting about with their actions. Was it against racism? Was it to show support for Colin Kaepernick who began the whole kneeling during the anthem in 2016? Was it a protest against Donald Trump? If it was for unity, then unity against what? The NFL had no clear message that fans could understand about their actions.

3. Forgetting the visual. People are visual. The visual of players kneeling during the anthem, not leaving the locker room until after the anthem was played, or just joining arms during the playing was a powerful visual but not in the way the NFL hoped. With no easy explanation for the protests, fans were left with a visual that to many seemed to imply

disrespect for the American flag and national anthem.

4. Forgetting their consumer. The millions who watch or attend football games are the NFL's consumers. They have sent powerful messages through declining viewership on what they think about kneeling during the national anthem. In their actions, the NFL players and owners seemed to disregard their consumers totally. More than that, they seemed to go against the brand story that fans have bought into in regarding the NFL. The NFL seemed to forget the oldest adage – the customer is always right.

So, what should the NFL do now?

1. Have an explanation on what all of this is about and how the actions we are seeing are consistent with the values that fans believe the NFL stands for and has stood for over the years.

2. Quit engaging President Trump and rather engage the fans.

3. Highlight the values the NFL stands for, and the works the NFL and players have done in communities.

Donald Trump's war with the NFL is a striking lesson of what happens if a brand appears to abandon its values. It is also a lesson that a whole new way of crisis management is needed if your brand is in the cross hairs with Donald Trump.

***About the Author:** David Johnson is the CEO and founder of Strategic Vision PR Group. With over 20 years of experience, he is a PR industry leader who specializes in media relations, crisis, communications, branding, and reputation management. He drives client strategy and has been integral in leading the firm forward since its founding in 2001 during the aftermath of 9/11. He has been described as a PR guru extraordinaire and the go to person for crisis communications by the news media.*