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THE REALLY GOOD BUFFALO CONCEPT TEST FOR “VALUES ADDED” BISON

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ABSTRACT—A consortium of tribal bison producers, tribal and state university faculty, and business professionals defined a “brand” of Native American-raised bison that would reflect the cultural and spiritual values of American Indians and the historic relationship between American Indians and bison. Following a concept-testing market-research approach, surveys were distributed to potential producers and consumers of this “Good Buffalo.” The consumer respondents indicated that environmentally friendly production practices (89%), humane treatment of animals (82.1%), and supporting prairie restoration were very important aspects of the brand. Price was very important for only 42.7% of consumer respondents, and being raised by American Indians was very important to 28% of consumer respondents. The number of producer survey respondents was too small to present clear conclusions. However, since completion of the brand development, Native American Indian and non-Native bison producers with similar interests have formed a business and adopted the brand concepts developed.

Key Words: Native American Indian values, bison, niche market

INTRODUCTION

For several years, an effort to “bring back the buffalo” has been of key interest in many American Indian communities across the country, and particularly in the Northern Plains. This region is also home to a majority of the nation’s 1994 tribal land-grant colleges, several of which have developed bison curriculum, worked with private tribal producers, and established their own university herds. Tribal college faculty approached colleagues at South Dakota State University during a meeting of

the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC) with the desire to develop a niche market for Native American-raised bison. The Lakota words for the concept underlying the effort are *Tatanka Waste* (pronounced *ta-TONK-a wash-TAY*), roughly translated as “Really Good Buffalo.”

Two unique factors have influenced the implementation of the Really Good Buffalo project: the dynamics of collaboration between 1862 and 1994 land-grant institutions, and the unique historical, cultural, and spiritual relationship between American Indians and bison. These

issues, and the diverse consortium of partners involved, have made it critically important that the project deliberately address values as part of the niche market analysis. As one tribal partner stated, “Great care must be taken when we are working with our brothers, the bison.”

Project objectives were:

1. To define a “brand” or term that encapsulates culturally appropriate bison production and processing.
2. To utilize the diversity of the consortium members to brainstorm and define the production and processing guidelines to meet the brand requirements.
3. To develop and administer surveys to key producers and consumers to determine the market potential for the newly branded bison and bison products.
4. To organize, catalog, and analyze the results of those surveys.
5. To develop strategic implications for business development based on analysis of the data and the parameters set forth in the initial conversations.

METHODS

C. Crazy Bull (1997) articulates a protocol for researchers interested in working with contemporary American Indian people. She argues that the research agenda should be set by the community, that efforts must directly involve and be respectful of Native people, that results must be openly shared with subjects, and that the research must have a tangible benefit for the community. Many of these same points are made by Smith (1999), who, in her scathing critique of traditional western scientific methods, discusses “decolonizing methodologies” as most appropriate for research with contemporary tribal people.

The project was guided by these ideas, and by the diverse consortium of stakeholders assembled who gave the Lakota name Tatanka Waste to the project. The translation Really Good Buffalo suited the philosophy of the consortium and remained as the project title. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used. The research proposal was approved by the South Dakota State University Institutional Review Board prior to project initiation.

An initial meeting of the Really Good Buffalo consortium was held, and it included presentations from tribal elders; private, tribal, and tribal college bison producers

and managers; and experts in marketing and agricultural finance. This meeting facilitated focus group discussions around the following questions:

- What essential *American Indian values* should Really Good Buffalo represent?
- What are the implications of these values for *production* of Really Good Buffalo?
- What are the implications of these values for *harvest and processing* of Really Good Buffalo?

Responses to these questions shed further light on the complexity and sensitive nature of the topic. Although a profit maximization model is a traditional approach to business decision making, cultural and spiritual values rather than primarily monetary remuneration were what consortia members wanted to be reflected in the Really Good Buffalo brand. Willock et al. (1999) support the contention that intrinsic values can be important in decision making and determining success, which suggests that self-sacrifice might be an important dimension (Beedell and Rehman 2000). Meeder and Cumber (2007) learned that altruism, as defined by the ability to help others, can be considered a very important factor in determining success. Cumber et al. (2004) explored the importance of identifying and understanding consciousness structure differences. Schultz and Kroeger (2007), in comparing traditional Native American Indian and dominant society values, developed a model of contrasting values that identified important Native American values. These values included the importance of the group, focus on the present and the right place, the ability to listen, and the importance of age, cooperation, patience, humility, sharing, harmony, mystery, and spirituality. This relates to an emerging concept of “ownership.” As presented by Lachapelle and McCool (2005), ownership has three distinct characteristics, that is, it involves processes “by which voices are heard and considered legitimate or valid,” it “challenges conventional notions of power and control over the outcome,” and ownership “concerns its distribution across diverse social, political, and ecological scales” (281–82).

Meta-economics relates to this study in that this kind of economics considers ethics and economics simultaneously. The “moral dimensions represented in such ideas as commitment, norms, values, and individual conscience” are considered in the decision-making process (Lynne 2009). Meta-economics is a dual-interest theory that can be defined multidimensionally. To quote Lynne (2010), meta-economics can be defined as (1) going beyond,

transcending standard economics through recognizing the possibility of a willingness for self-sacrifice on the part of individuals, (2) an economic theory that sees human nature as motivated by both egoistic-hedonistic-based self-interest but also an empathy-sympathy-based other (or shared) interest, (3) an approach to economics seeing the potential for value emerging on terms greater than the sum of the parts, as described by synergism arising in the interaction and feedback between egoistic-hedonistic-based pursuits and empathy-sympathy-based pursuits, (4) seeing economic empathy in terms like those described in Adam Smith's theory of moral sentiments, that is, imagining oneself in the state of others in the community (and the ecosystem within which the economy is embedded) and as a result conditioning one's own internalized pursuit of self-interest, becoming more in sympathy with the also internalized and shared other-interest of others, (5) an economic approach that broadens rational choice to include the virtues, ethics, and the moral dimension explicitly in, and a rational part of, such choice, (6) an approach to economics based in philosophical pragmatism more than in the traditional utilitarian philosophical base of microeconomics, (7) an approach to economics recognizing inherent connectivity with the individual and the economy, both being embedded within the social and natural (spaceship earth) system, (8) an approach to economics seeing explicit consideration of the content of the moral and ethical order as a main focus of the policy process in a democratic market economy, and giving analytical content to the metaphor of the invisible hand, (9) a humanistic economics, going beyond Jeremy Bentham and back to Adam Smith to make for a virtuous commercial society, and (10) economics changed in form, altered and transformed while building upon both thermodynamic (spaceship earth, ecosystem) and humanistic principles.

Among the emergent themes from the focus groups were that Really Good Buffalo should be: premium quality, nutritious, natural, environmentally friendly, chemical- and hormone-free, raised by American Indians, treated with respect, and harvested in the field. Also discussed was the need for the niche marketing effort to ultimately benefit tribal people. For example, participants discussed selling enough Really Good Bison at premium prices to help support prairie restoration efforts and the distribution of Really Good Buffalo meat to reservation elderly and school nutrition programs at reduced costs. To help validate this input, a series of in-depth follow-up interviews was conducted with tribal elders, nutritionists, and bison program managers on the Cheyenne River Indian Reservation.

Interview results and the compiled focus group results were shared at a second meeting of consortium members. Consensus on the elements for a definition of the Really Good Buffalo brand was reached. Input was collected for the construction of consumer and producer surveys, and for the more formal organization of the producers in the group. Following market research approaches, a "concept testing" methodology was utilized (Moriarty and Venkatesan 1978). Commonly used in developing corporate marketing campaigns for new products, concept testing is the process of using quantitative and qualitative methods to evaluate consumer response to a product idea prior to the introduction of the product to the market.

A survey was developed and mailed to consumers of bison. The consumer survey included 24 items consisting of open-ended questions and a Likert-type scale. Surveys were mailed to a nationwide sample of 450 customers of an existing regional marketer of premium bison meat. A follow-up postcard was distributed resulting in 235 returned surveys, or a 52% response rate.

A separate survey was developed and mailed to a listing of tribal bison producers in the region. The list of producers was developed from consortium members and from input of the Inter-Tribal Bison Cooperative. Ten surveys were returned, resulting in a 32% response rate. The majority of survey respondents were Native American Indians who resided on reservations in North and South Dakota: Pine Ridge, Rosebud, Lower Brule, Cheyenne River, and Standing Rock. While this sample size is small, it reflects the limited number of Native American Indian bison producers in the region.

Quantitative results of the consumer surveys were analyzed using Statistical Analysis Software (SAS/STAT 1990). Simple statistics (means and frequencies) were calculated. Open-ended, qualitative responses were transcribed verbatim, and data were coded and classified according to emergent themes. Results from the producer survey were not analyzed statistically because of the small *n* number, but are discussed here in order to add insight to the study. Results of both surveys were presented and implications for a strategic plan were discussed at a final meeting of the consortium held in the late summer of 2005.

Characteristics of Respondents: Consumers and Producers. Demographic characteristics of consumers indicated that survey respondents were predominantly white males between the ages of 51 to 65 years old, with nearly 80% having at least a four-year degree. More than 90% of the respondents earned greater than \$40,000 per

year. This is in contrast to \$46,326 real median household income in the United States during the same time period (DeNavas-Walt et al. 2006).

The demographic characteristics of the respondents to the producer survey indicated that 80% of the participants were between the ages of 41 and 65 years old. All of the survey respondents were male. The occupations included ranchers, herd managers, biologists, tribal members, and a wildlife manager. The majority of producer respondents resided in South Dakota.

RESULTS

Defining the brand. A primary objective of the project was to define a brand that would represent the values tribal people associate with bison in a manner that would appeal to consumers. This was accomplished through the dynamic process of meetings, focus groups, and interviews, detailed above. At the conclusion of this process, the following brand definition for “good buffalo” was used for initial research purposes:

“Really Good Buffalo” represents premium quality, nutritious bison meat, raised in a natural environment by American Indians on the Great Plains. This concept reflects traditional indigenous values including respect, courage, connectedness and generosity. “Really Good Buffalo” are raised in a humane way, by people with deep historical, cultural and spiritual relationships with bison. Support of “Really Good Buffalo” will help provide low-cost bison meat to tribal youth and elderly, and support Native prairie restoration in reservation communities across the region.

Identifying production and processing guidelines. The general themes of these guidelines (e.g., natural, humane, etc.) are reflected in the brand definition above. Further input was obtained through producer and consumer surveys. The brand defined not only values for bison management but also specified priorities for the use of funds from the sale of Really Good Buffalo meat. As a next step, a subgroup of the larger consortium is considering more precise definitions and implications for these guidelines, along with related issues such as mechanisms for enforcement.

Consumers. Surveys indicated that an overwhelming majority of respondents (92%) supported the idea to create

a Really Good Buffalo concept of meat production, and had a positive reaction to the proposed brand definition. In open-ended responses, terms such as “accept, agree, appeal to, appreciate, feel good about, favor, believe it is worthwhile, wonderful, great, excellent, excitement, positive, very positive” were used to describe subjects’ enthusiasm for the brand.

Some respondents ($n = 21$) had a more negative response to the brand definition. Among the issues raised were concerns about the choice of the Really Good Buffalo terminology ($n = 9$), the length of the definition ($n = 8$), and the language used in the definition—some thought the definition sounded “too politically correct” or “too flowery” ($n = 5$); others ($n = 4$) thought the definition did not provide enough information ($n = 4$) and that there was too much emphasis on Native Americans ($n = 4$).

More than 80% of consumer respondents indicated they would be likely to very likely to purchase the product. The mean response to this item (1 = unlikely, 2 = perhaps, 3 = likely, 4 = very likely) was 3.22. In addition, potential consumers stated that they would be interested in purchasing other, non-meat Good Buffalo products, including leather (43%), artwork (31%), hides (18%), and other (9%).

In ranking the importance of several Good Buffalo criteria, almost 89% of consumers said that environmentally friendly production practices were very important components of the brand, followed by chemical-free (85.9%), nutrition and health benefits (83.4%), respectful, humane treatment of animals (82.1%), and supporting prairie restoration (81.7%). Price was very important to 42.7% of respondents, while 28% thought the bison being raised by American Indians was a very important aspect of the brand (see Table 1).

When asked for open-ended responses to “other important factors,” 18 responded that distribution, shipping, and packaging were important concerns; 12 commented about the importance of the animals being grass-fed and not going to feedlots; nine expressed concern over humane production and harvesting practices; four indicated health benefits were most important; and two said product taste and quality were of prime concern.

Cost was cited ($n = 25$) as being an important consideration impacting consumers’ likelihood of purchase Really Good Buffalo. One said, “It will come down to cost.” Another cited premium bison meat products currently available as being “too expensive to eat on a regular basis.” Several respondents ($n = 16$) cited distribution concerns such as access, shipping, handling, and packaging as issues that would impact their buying decisions.

TABLE 1
IMPORTANCE OF CHARACTERISTICS ASSOCIATED WITH REALLY GOOD BUFFALO,
FROM CONSUMER SURVEY RESPONDENTS

Characteristics	Not important		Somewhat important		Very important		N
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	
Raised by American Indians	48	20.7	119	51.3	65	28	232
Environmentally friendly production practices	1	0.4	26	11.1	208	88.5	235
Respectful/humane treatment of animals	3	1.3	39	16.6	193	82.1	235
Nutrition/health benefits	4	1.7	35	14.9	196	83.4	235
Chemical free	2	0.9	31	13.2	201	85.9	234
Produced and harvested in accordance with cultural protocols	40	17.4	85	37.0	105	45.7	230
Supports contemporary American Indian communities	3	1.3	92	39.1	140	59.6	235
Supports prairie restoration	2	0.9	41	17.4	192	81.7	235
Taste	2	0.9	40	17.0	193	82.1	235
Cost	23	9.9	110	47.4	99	42.7	232

Note: Consumer surveys were sent to customers of a regional marketer of premium bison meat.

Others ($n = 14$) indicated loyalty to existing suppliers as a reason not to purchase Really Good Buffalo, while five responded they would "shop around," indicating they would try the product and would likely purchase it again if they had a satisfying consumer experience. One said, "Its flavor would have to be worth the extra money."

Still, when asked how much consumers would expect to pay for Really Good Buffalo relative to beef, 55.2% of the respondents stated that they would pay 50% more for bison than beef. Respondents (47.8%) stated that they eat red meat two to three times per week, with 47.8% indicating that they would serve Good Buffalo at least two to three times per week.

Producers. Producer surveys were distributed to 32 tribal bison producers in the four-state region; 32% ($n = 10$) of producers returned the surveys; all were Native American Indian males living in South Dakota. Respondents were from several different reservations, including Pine Ridge, Rosebud, Lower Brule, Cheyenne River, and Standing Rock.

When asked about their reaction to the brand definition of Really Good Buffalo, respondents were positive. One stated, "I agree with the brand definition, positive, and the definition does a good job of covering reasons for bison being linked with tribal communities."

The producers offered numerous descriptors that they felt related to and were important to the brand definition of Really Good Buffalo. Most important were premium quality, raised in a natural environment, and raised by American Indians, followed by raised in a humane way, nutritious, reflects traditional indigenous values, and assists with reservation prairie restoration.

All but one producer respondent indicated interest in producing Really Good Buffalo. Health and that their "livelihood depended on it" were offered as reasons for their interest; the lone negative respondent indicated he would need more information before committing to production.

In addition to being asked about their reaction to the Good Buffalo brand, producers responded with their perspectives on the relative importance of several issues facing tribal Native American Indian bison producers.

Marketing of Good Buffalo, organizing producers, and developing a business plan were the three highest priority concerns among potential Good Buffalo producers. Producers also stated that it was important to develop production guidelines, enforce the guidelines and specifications, and secure and manage a mobile slaughtering facility, which would allow for respectful, humane field harvest of animals.

Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis. The final project objective was to use data collected to develop strategic implications for the business development of a Good Buffalo enterprise. An economist and Native American Indian business professional utilized the SWOT analysis approach to address this objective.

SWOT analysis is a useful analytical tool when developing a business plan and/or marketing plan (Pearce and Robinson 2005). SWOT analysis identifies a company's or industry's internal strengths and weaknesses and its external opportunities and threats. SWOT components derived from the Good Buffalo survey responses are presented in bullet form below.

Strengths:

- Strong support for the idea to create Good Buffalo products.
- Majority of potential consumers rated themselves “likely to very likely” to purchase Good Buffalo.
- Most (65%) potential consumer responses would pay 25%–50% more for Good Buffalo.
- The niche market appears to be national in scope.
- Above-average survey response rates and additional qualitative responses suggest the values associated with Good Buffalo resonate strongly with potential consumers and producers.

Weaknesses:

- Cost of production according to Good Buffalo brand definition (i.e., supporting prairie restoration, cultural protocols, environmentally friendly practices) may complicate and increase cost of production.
- Support for a product via concept-testing survey does not always translate to purchase of that product.
- Survey respondents were not a representative sample of the general population.
- Low producer survey response limits generalizability.

- Consistent supply channels may not yet be in place to meet demand; limited number of animals committed to the program.
- Some Native American Indian producers raise bison only for personal or tribal use and will not commit animals to the program.
- Concerns that brand definition could be interpreted in a negative manner.

Opportunities:

- Potential to connect with well-educated, high-income niche market.
- Growth in organic, “slow food” movement.
- Potential for additional income through sale of non-meat products.
- Ability to integrate forward and backward on the value chain.
- Utilization of internet direct-marketing models shows promise.
- Potential for funding minority-owned business ventures.

Threats:

- Relative ease of substituting a lower-cost beef product for bison.
- Consortium represents “young” industry; not yet well organized.
- Limited previous experience with niche marketing.
- Lack of distribution system in place.
- Production and processing guidelines need refinement.
- No enforcement mechanism for production and processing guidelines.
- High costs of transportation and slaughtering.
- Impact of government regulations not clear.
- High marketing expense to establish brand.
- Culturally sensitive nature of bison to many Native Americans could contribute to misunderstanding among partners, thus slowing process.

It is imperative for the producers to further analyze the data generated by the consumer survey. The criteria gathered can help provide specific direction for the producers of Good Buffalo. For example, due to the high income and educational levels of respondents, a marketing promotion could be developed to target this specific audience. A second example would be to develop a campaign to promote the value-added, non-meat products generated by the production of bison. Finally, producers will need to promote the important characteristics of this product that were identified in the surveys, such as environmentally friendly, chemical-free, and nutritional value of Good Buffalo.

The producers' survey sample provided several important factors to consider. There was an overwhelming enthusiasm to produce Good Buffalo. The results indicated that the producers wanted to organize and develop both a business plan and marketing plan. There were concerns, however, that the current supply of committed animals could not meet a large market demand unless additional producers were added. Respondents knew producers who preferred to grow only enough bison for their own use and were not ready to commit to a larger marketing scheme.

In summary, the SWOT analysis affirmed overwhelming support for the Good Buffalo brand definition among potential producers and consumers. However, other important issues emerged as critical for consideration as the consortium moves forward. These included, first, the need for strengthening the organization of producers. This strengthened consortium would then need to develop viable organizational, business, and marketing plans, refine and enforce production and processing guidelines, and address concerns relating to delivery of a consistently quality product.

CONCLUSIONS

A brand definition for Native American Indian-raised Really Good Buffalo elicited favorable responses during concept-testing research among potential producers and consumers of the product. Respondents indicated positive reaction to values associated with this product, including environmentally friendly, chemical-free, nutrition and health benefits, humane treatment of animals, taste, support for prairie restoration, and Native American Indian communities. This "values added" approach represents an important potential niche market and affirms production, processing, and marketing approaches favored by many contemporary tribal bison producers.

Other researchers have found that consumers in California wanted to know more about their food, including topics such as safety, nutrition, and ethical issues, such as treatment of animals, environmental impacts, and wages and working conditions for those who produce their food (Howard 2005). South Dakota and other states are attempting to establish premium state-based brands in order to differentiate their products in the marketplace. The concept-testing process associated with this project aimed to determine whether or not a brand based on traditional Native American Indian values toward bison could translate into a niche market for Native American-raised premium bison meat and products. Results presented in this paper appear promising. Results are limited in their generalizability due to a nonrandom consumer sample and a relatively small number of producer respondents. However, since the completion of the brand development, a business plan has been developed by a group of Native American Indian bison producers and non-Native producers with shared interests. With this plan, a business has been developed, a mobile slaughter unit has been purchased, and guidelines for slaughter and management have been developed.

Future challenges include organizing additional producers, establishing enforcement mechanisms for brand guidelines, securing supply and delivery of consistent-quality product, and developing more in-depth business and marketing plans. Explicit acknowledgment, respect, and integration of cultural values and relationships between tribal people and bison will be critical to the success of the effort as it moves forward.

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