

MARKETING AND THE FUR TRADE:
AN ABORIGINAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The history of the North American fur trade is a classic example of Western marketing methods becoming established in "virgin territory." This paper examines the impact of European marketing upon a specific culture, the Winnebago. Although a mere footnote if considered as part of European economic/colonial history, when viewed from the Winnebago perspective, these relationships become a case study in the macro-impact which marketing can exert upon society. In an era when increased international trade is a way of life, studies of marketing techniques transforming social and cultural traditions, provide clues on how to market products in third world countries.

INTRODUCTION

An example of marketing practices and methods which has received serious attention among historians is the fur trade of North America. Popular historians such as Francis Parkman and Washington Irving adopted the topic as their own, and some visionaries even equated its spread with "Manifest Destiny." James Fenimore Cooper, the first significant American novelist, nested his immortal "Leatherstocking Tales) amid the backdrop of the colonial fur trade and its remnants which were inevitably displaced during the early years of United States' independence. A number of analyses of this fascinating phenomena (such as Harold Innis' The Fur Trade in Canada and Hiram Chittenden's The American Fur Trade) provide classic accounts of how European traditions confronted the new world, became a part of the socio/economic milieu of two continents, and successfully adjusted to a new competitive environment.

In an era when the industrialized, high, tech, Western powers are stepping up international activities, examples such as the fur trade are useful since they provide significant accounts of commercial relationships between different cultures; although many aboriginal peoples might seem rudimentary when judged merely from a technological yardstick, they often possess sophistication in other realms of human culture as well as being ecologically adjusted to their environments. The relationships between the red men and white during the fur trade era has the potential to illuminate subtleties of cultural contact, diffusion, and interaction.

For a variety of reasons, however, existing historical analysis of the fur trade has emphasized the impact of this industry upon Europeans and European institutions; relatively little attention has been specifically devoted to the ways in which the fur trade triggered massive changes in the lifeways of the aboriginal peoples of North America. On the one hand, the better known historical accounts of the fur trade were written by, about, and for Europeans; the New World and its native peoples are depicted as challenges and opportunities, but not as the major focus of analysis for their own sake. Secondly, although we often think of "Indians" as a somewhat homogeneous cultural group, the race embodies a plurality of cultures which responded to white intervention in many profoundly different ways.

Thus, a unified history of the fur trade which examines the cultural diversity of North America and specific aboriginal responses to technologically dominant interlopers is a task which has never been satisfactorily tackled.

Here, I will deal with one specific native American society, the Winnebago of Wisconsin and will consider how this people emerged as a significant partner of white fur traders. Equally important will be an analysis of changes in Winnebago culture which were wrought by these new marketing activities. By dealing with the history of the North American fur trade using one isolated example, I will show how a specific people responded to the pressures of Western marketing in their own unique way. This exercise, it is hoped, will help crystallize the issues which must be confronted by Western marketers interacting in new spheres of influence.

THE PRECONTACT WINNEBAGO

When Jean Nicolet, the great French explorer, first contacted the Winnebago around 1630, he was startled to learn that they spoke a strange language which was totally unintelligible to him (Butterfield 1881). This surprised the famous adventurer who, having trekked across the Great Lakes had become familiar with several native American dialects. Equally surprising was the fact that the Winnebago had a higher degree of social complexity than neighboring tribes and the various other societies Nicolet had contacted on his trip.

Modern researchers using ethno-historical methods coupled and anthropological ethnographic materials have been able to explain why the Winnebago were so different from their neighbors.

The precontact Winnebago were a relatively small cultural entity which had moved to what is now Wisconsin at around 1300 A.D. Totally surrounded by Algonquian cultures which were primarily hunting and gathering tribes, the Winnebago eventually settled in the southeastern part of the Green Bay peninsula. They possibly did this because the peninsula had significant strategic advantages and afforded the Winnebago protection from the Algonquian which were dreaded enemies. For a period of three hundred years, the Winnebago and their rivals were in a state of almost constant warfare (Radin 1956:114).

Completely surrounded by hostile rivals, who vastly outnumbered them, the Winnebago could easily have been a sitting duck. The tribe had an "ace in the hole," however, they possessed a complex and highly structured culture and they used their organizational and technical skills to stave off onslaughts of their rivals and enemies. "It was this fact that allowed them to keep their older culture fairly intact." (Radin 1956:114).

During this era, the Algonquian were highly decentralized consisting of small bands which constantly moved from place to place. The Winnebago in contrast lived in towns and villages. "During this period, the Winnebago lived in large groupings and the villages were relatively large in comparison to historic villages, a point stressed in Winnebago tradition" (Lurie 1960:796). Dependent on a strong social structure for their very survival, their complex social organization was typified by a sophisticated division of labor and by a strong system of social control. These two aspects of Winnebago culture (division of labor and strong social controls) were united in The Bear Clan. "A Bear Clan informant explained as late as 1944 that he understood the 'police force' function of his clan originated in the very early pre-white period when the Winnebago lived together in villages of several thousand people. They thus required a powerful and highly formulated organization to maintain control over the groups" (Lurie 1960:796).

Economically, the Winnebago were sedentary agriculturalists; tradition maintains that in the old days gardens "several arrow shots" across existed (Lurie 1960:796). They lived in large well organized towns and a single chief controlled many people. (Radin 1915-6).

The Winnebago, then, were a relatively small group which in precontact times had been able to survive by creating a stable food supply and a highly organized society ruled over by chiefs wielded great power and authority.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF WINNEBAGO SOCIAL STRUCTURE

When the fur trade first began to influence Winnebago culture, therefore, the tribe had a complex social organization. As a result, the Winnebago were not particularly well suited to the business of fur trapping and trading. They lived in villages and were not as skilled hunters as their rivals who used hunting as their primary means of production.

These Algonquian possessed hunting skills and had evolved a social organization ideally suited to the requirements of this new industry. "It is possible that the central Algonquian tribes were better able to accommodate themselves to the requirements of the fur trade than were the Winnebago. The Algonquians were already organized in terms of local bands and relied largely upon hunting before the fur trade was introduced (Lurie 1960:805).

Significantly, providing European trade goods and satisfying the European demand for beaver skins was initially accommodated by other Indians who functioned as middlemen. Still, European contact, even though a native intermediary, was significant because it created a market for new types of goods and gave a differential advantage to whatever groups were able to trade for scarce European goods including guns: the advanced technology of production (hunting) and warfare.

Initially the Winnebago seem to have had little interest in the fur trade; having a self sufficient agricultural society, they possessed an efficient and relatively reliable means of production. Eventually, however, the balance of power shifted towards those who had ready access to European goods. During this time, the Winnebago were badly hurt by warfare, infighting, and disease. To make matters worse, other Eastern tribes such as the Iroquois were emerging as a potential threat. Under such circumstances, the Winnebago "culturally disordered ... reformed their socio economic patterns around the pursuit of peltry animals"(Lurie 1960:804).

Since hunting was a non-centralized activity, political authority became less centralized. In pre-contact times there was a "single head chief over large numbers of people ... These generalized views of chieftain are still expressed by reliable informants. However, during the treaty period of the early 19th Century, the Winnebago clearly practiced a system of leadership based on the local group" (Lurie 1960:796-7).

As the Winnebago reorganized their society to produce and market animal pelts to French fur traders, their material culture also began to reflect their new economic livelihood. Originally the Winnebago had lived in gabled lodges, but they eventually adopted wigwams similar to that used by their Algonquian neighbors (Radin 1915:104-5). This reflects the influences of decentralization and the less permanent nature of the settlements. In the years that followed, "Large villages gave way to scattered communities of several hundred people each, distributed over a wide territory. A general diminution of game throughout the eighteenth century contributed to a further scattering of local groups (Lurie 1960:805-806).

MARKETING AND WINNEBAGO EVOLUTION

Having quickly reviewed the transformation of Winnebago social structure, we can readily see that the introduction of new products, new marketing relationships and the demand for a new commodity (furs) profoundly impacted the very social fabric of Winnebago culture. It demonstrates how significantly marketing can influence a new target market or markets.

First, for the Winnebago to be affected, the marketing did not need to be carried out by Europeans; indeed, in the early phases of the fur trade, the French enlisted the aid of other Indian tribes to function as middlemen. The fact that European technology provided a differential advantage, however, caused the goods being marketed to be a motivating force leading to social change.

In the case of the Winnebago, we see a cultural transformation which was more than merely a response to European goods. Even more important than the guns, kettles, and trinkets were the adjustments which had to be made in Winnebago social structure so that they could compete in the fur trapping and trading business. Thus the most radical changes in Winnebago culture were triggered by significant restructurings needed to accommodate a new marketing institution instead of being transformed by the actual products being marketed. These changes included a decentralizing of political power and a new settlement pattern based on small villages scattered over a large area, and the dismantling of the large towns of earlier eras.

The important fact to remember is that the profound changes wrought by the quest for European trade goods were strategic adjustments to specific local conditions, and that the unique environment, not the goods themselves spurred social change. It should be remembered by international marketing specialists, therefore, that an embrace of Western products does not necessarily mean that the society is becoming another homogenized part in the checkerboard of the Republic of Technology.

WINNEBAGO MYTHOLOGY AND THE FUR TRADE

Social disruptions caused by new economic realities (such as those created by the intrusion of Western marketing in a new region) often trigger equally profound changes in the mythology or religious system of a people. One commonly observed phenomena is the cargo cult syndrome where people unable to comprehend the new structure of their lives become convinced that Western technology is magic. Under these circumstances, tensions caused by cultural contact such as marketing lead to a religious response. Indeed, Radin reports that something along this order may have occurred among the Winnebago and that one religious ceremony, the medicine rite, was a response to crises created by the coming of the fur trade (Radin 1945:50-1).

The impact of the fur trade upon religion, however, was much more profound than merely a rather pathetic response to massive forces beyond their control. Indeed, as the Winnebago began to forge their adaptations to the fur trade, elements of their religion shifted to embody the prerequisites of a new set of economic realities. In specific the classic trickster myth of the Winnebago was transformed to dovetail with the new reliance upon the fur trade.

The Winnebago trickster cycle is a rather elaborate story of an asocial, but heroic figure. In the classic version of this myth which is the closest we have

to a precontact telling, a "normal individual, the chief of the community takes it upon himself to defy all customs sacred and profane" (Radin 1953:336). As a result of his disregard for social values and mores, the trickster figure and those dependent upon him suffer. As the text progresses, the trickster "attempts to establish a connection with other human beings" (Ibid:337), but the socialization process is slow and difficult. Once he is again fully integrated with society, however, he becomes respected and honored and eventually achieves the status of a deity. The text underscores the disruption caused by a disregard for society and emphasizes the benefits which befall the individual who acts according to socially codified principles and mores

Being the most traditional version available the text is most reflective of the precontact socio/political milieu, it lauds a strong and highly structured society. The whole traditional version deals with a specific personality type (individualist) and the results of his asocial and individualistic behavior. Not until the trickster's personality and behavior strategies are socialized does he live a worthwhile and meaningful life. The traditional myth, therefore, explicitly discusses behavior strategies and their probable result in a particular cultural and environmental situation. For pragmatic reasons social and cooperative action is lauded while individualistic and asocial behavior is condemned. This economic influence, however, is not apparent until the myth is compared with a later, post-contact version which evolved under different social and economic conditions" (Walle 1978:77).

"Turtle Tries To Get Credit" (Radin 1926) is a version of the trickster cycle which clearly reflects the impact of the new economic realities. The hero "is trickster" and all the characteristics that are associated with him in the trickster cycle are found here. He is untrustful, boastful, and a gambler (Radin 1926:26). Although the usual trickster motifs are present, they are used in ways which clearly dramatize the requirements of the post contact economic realities. The new skills of trapping and trading and the new importance of a less structured society are clearly emphasized.

The basic plot of the modern trickster text involves an individualistic Winnebago who cannot get credit from the French fur traders because of his erratic behavior. One poor but kindly fur trader saves Turtle and his family from cold and hunger. Turtle then adopts a wise strategy of individual action and cultural innovation which results in a monumental winter's catch. As a result, the kindly fur trader becomes rich and Turtle becomes rich, honored, and a de facto White. This version actually has two intertwining plots, one dealing with how the Winnebago should behave and the other with how the fur traders should deal with the Indians (Walle 1978:77-8).

The modern text is clearly of heuristic value in demonstrating the pragmatics of a new economic reality in which "culturally disordered, they reformed their socio-economic patterns around the pursuit of peltry animals. Thus, the first distinguishable phase of Winnebago acculturation was not to European or to European goods as such but to models of Indian-White relationships and material syncretisms worked out by other tribes" (Lurie 1960:804-5). "Turtle Tries to Get Credit" is essentially a literary codification of these "models ... of material syncretisms" created through the reshuffling of an old traditional mythic form.

The major character remains basically unchanged. The trickster figure is always a loner, a challenger, and a breaker of tradition. The fate of the trickster, however, is radically different in the two versions and the influencing variable is clearly social and economic conditions. During historical periods of high social

integration, individualistic behavior was depicted as counter-productive. When, on the other hand, the society became individualist and competitive, autonomy of action was lauded.

By emphasizing the influences which socio-economic conditions exert upon mythology, the plot structures of these two trickster texts have been treated as reflections of certain behavior strategies during two periods in Winnebago history. The changes in this religious heritage resulted directly from the intrusion of European marketing upon an aboriginal people.

The changes in the trickster cycle reflect the exact same tendencies as the changes in Winnebago social structure. First, the European products being traded seem to have had less influence upon the Winnebago than the new marketing opportunities and institutions they faced. Secondly, the Winnebago reformed their religion and their ethical superstructure by subtly recombining what already was uniquely theirs. Reforming what was distinctive, the new adjustment was equally distinctive and unique.

GLOBALIZATION OF MARKETS OR GLOBALIZATION OF MARKETING

We live in an era when much has been written and spoken about the Globalization of Markets theory (Levitt 1983, 1983b). The basic assumption of this perspective is that the standardization of products will inevitably lead to a culturally homogeneous world. Such a model is based upon a unilineal theory of cultural evolution which asserts that technological progress leads to a unity among all cultures.

The example of the Winnebago provides something of a test case of Globalization theory. Considering this example, we have found that:

1. Profound changes in Winnebago culture and religion did not result from the diffusion of innovations so much as from attempts to accommodate the new marketing system being established.
2. The Winnebago transformed themselves in ways which reflected their unique history and their unique situations, not universal evolution.

In view of the Winnebago example, we must keep alert to the possibility that the changes we observe in cultures currently experiencing "Westernization" might not be experiencing the general, inevitable flow of history triggered by the technologies being marketed. Just the opposite: In order to deal with new marketing institutions, specific and unique adjustments might be taking place to accommodate equally specific and unique opportunities.

To make matters more confusing and difficult, these culturally-specific adjustments influenced by current marketing methods are potentially not in the long term interest of the society. Such marketing opportunities often prove to be transient: short term "flashes in the pan."

In the case of the Winnebago, the beaver did not prove to be a renewable resource and after a few decades furs became scarce in Wisconsin. Tragically, by that time key aspects of their former economic life and social structure had been eclipsed. In the final analysis they had lost skills of organization and agriculture in order to accommodate an intrusive marketing system which would prove to be rather fickle.

The land depleted of beaver, the fur trade moved further West leaving in its wake a people who had become more than merely dependent upon Western trade goods: their society had become intimately linked with some specific marketing institutions. Profoundly and tragically, they had reordered their social structure and their cultural tool kit around marketing relationships which ultimately ceased to exist. They had given up a complex sedentary life based on agriculture and now that they needed these old skills, they were gone.

A MANDARIN ROBE AND ITS MESSAGE

Theodore Levitt, advancing a global theory of markets, discusses armed Iranian revolutionaries wearing fashionable clothes and armed with modern weapons. He discusses poverty-ridden families living in the squalor of an abandoned car with their eyes glued to a TV set. The purpose of such examples is to demonstrate how the various cultures of the world are becoming more and more homogeneous. Such a focus, however, blurs our ability to clearly see the impact of new products and methods upon society and people. Outside the usual range of marketing thought, such issues are of profound interest both to humanitarians and to those concerned with the long term profitability of their firms. Specifically, how does the intrusion of Western methods, products, and trading relationships impact upon each new target market. Even if the long term flow of cultural history will ultimately create a universal culture, the painful process of adjustment must be consciously addressed. Equal attention must be devoted to societies which cannot adapt or have difficulty doing so.

Such issues are clouded in the usual analysis of the American fur trade since such studies merely concentrate upon the problems which Europeans faced as they established a complex network of trading relationships among a host of aboriginal peoples which ranged over an unexplored continent. Investigating one aboriginal society and the influence of the fur trade upon it, however, we can appreciate how European business methods, priorities and products transformed a people. Instead of uniformly marching towards ubiquitous cultural homogeneity, the Winnebago actually devolved their complex and highly structured society and lost the traits which we usually associate with "progress." Technology thrust them backwards, not forwards.

In the 1630's when Nicolet first visited the Winnebago, he made a laughable mistake: he thought the Winnebago were Chinese.

Nicolet with a knowledge of Oriental culture but obviously confused about geography, prepared himself well for his grand entrance: "He was clothed in a large garment of Chinese dasmask, sprinkled with [embroidered] flowers and birds of different colors ... Possibly he had reached the far east ... Possibly a party of Mandarins would soon greet him and welcome him to Cathy. And this robe - this dress of ceremony - was brought all the way from Quebec, doubtless, with a view to such contingency" (Butterfield 1881).

Nicolet had made a naive mistake in geography, but this very error demonstrates a profound understanding of human nature. Whatever else he did, Nicolet seems to have accepted people on what he believed were their own terms; in dealings with others he adopted their ways, adhered to their protocol, and respected their habits. Such a perspective ignores concepts which in the Victorian era were labeled Social Darwinism, and their re-emergence as the Globalization of Markets Model. Not only can we learn much from the Winnebago fur trade which triggered the devolution of a complex social structure, we can also learn much from Nicolet and his Mandarin Robe.

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