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**Achieving Corporate Social Responsibility:  
The Ethics of Souvenirs**

T. Savage\*

L. Brennan\*

\*Swinburne University

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## **Achieving Corporate Social Responsibility: The Ethics of Souvenirs**

Theresa Savage and Linda Brennan, Swinburne University of Technology

### **Abstract**

This paper is designed to contribute to the development of a set of guidelines for ethical decision-making in the souvenir industry. It is argued that souvenirs often depict the culture and heritage of Indigenous minority populations who may not be well equipped to protect their cultural identity or prevent stereotyping or the exploitation of their culture by other more commercially minded individuals or organizations. While such stereotyping and exploitation is probably unintentional, a framework for operation is needed to ensure that potentially vulnerable populations are not disenfranchised by their limited participation in an industry society. It is hoped that the proposed guidelines will make a positive contribution towards reconciliation between the political majority and Indigenous people throughout the world.

### **Background**

Tourism is one of the world's largest and fastest growing economic sectors and is increasing in importance as a powerful means of economic development for emerging nations (UNWTO 2008). Despite world events, international competition, and changes in consumer demand, the worldwide average of consumption expenditure at tourist sites increased by close to 6 percent (5.6 percent) with US\$856 billion from 2006 to 2007 (ibid.:3) This increase is attributed to an increase in visitor numbers as well as an increase in consumption per visitor. One lucrative aspect of the tourism expenditure is the design, production and sale of souvenirs and shopping, which increased nearly 6 percent on average worldwide in 2007 (ibid.). Many souvenir products are based on presenting images of what is iconic or indigenous to the host country for sale. It is therefore relevant to acknowledge that the semiotics of souvenirs that depict Indigenous people, their culture or heritage impact not only on the purveyors of souvenirs, but also on Indigenous populations around the world. The use of the imagery and culture of the world's various Indigenous peoples plays an important role in the development of souvenirs. How much of this usage benefits the Indigenous populations is not known. We start with the assumption that the souvenir industry does not intend to exploit Indigenous iconography. In this conceptual paper, our aim is to set up ethical guidelines for organizations that design, create and manufacture souvenirs that relate to the designs or identity of Indigenous people.

Souvenirs are regarded as being among the most valued items acquired during a vacation (Littrell 1990). People purchase material goods not only for what they do but also for what they mean (Levy 1959). Souvenirs in particular carry a strong semiotic message as they are thought to make intangible experiences tangible. As such, souvenirs have the potential to increase social status in that they provide a unique experience for the tourist to discuss with friends, workmates and family. Furthermore, depending on their provenance, souvenirs can increase self-esteem and prestige (Gordon 1986; Graburn 2009). However, souvenirs can also promote damaging stereotypes or myths. Mostly, the producers of such items justify such negative images as 'humour.' However, even humour often supports negative stereotypes (Ford and Ferguson 2004).

Of significance to this paper on souvenirs and their effect on Indigenous and minority groups is that souvenirs involve a socio-psychological process in which they have the potential to build an

individual's sense of self-worth and social status. Souvenirs have intrinsic value for tourists as concrete evidence of a visit to another place as well as showing something unique about the society and culture of that place (Graburn 1984). Souvenirs, as mementos of how an individual spent his/her leisure time while on vacation, help to tell part of the story of a person's life (Kleine et al. 1995) and in some cases they might even hold special value for an individual via self-extension (Belk 1988). It is not known how much consideration of social or cultural stereotypes and their impact is taken in the production of souvenirs, nor how much value is transmitted through the value chain to the originators of the imagery being used in the artefact.

In general, souvenirs depict traditional or stereotypical aspects of a particular society or culture. Indigenous people are often represented in souvenirs in parts of the world that have been modernized and developed through colonization by stronger powers such as in the United States, Canada, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand and Japan. For instance, in North America, popular souvenir items include Native American artefacts such as items with Indian designs, feathered headdresses, Indian moccasins and miniature tepees. These stereotypical souvenirs are even sold in places where the Indigenous people of the area never used such items. Likewise in Australia, souvenir items tend to depict Indigenous Australians in stereotypical ways as playing a didgeridoo, making bark paintings or hunting with a spear (Edwards 1996; Ryan and Huyton 1998) or as stockmen. In Japan, the Indigenous Ainu are often depicted with bows and arrows, wearing traditional headdresses and kimono in woodcarvings that accentuate their sunken eyes, strong chin line and more prominent noses. These depictions objectify the Indigenous populations whose imagery and culture is portrayed.

As items of exchange, souvenirs carry meaning within the semiotic system (Dant 1999; Miller 1987; Morley 1992). Baudrillard (1981) regards consumption as 'the stage where the commodity is produced as a sign and signs (culture) are produced as commodities'. As commodities are conceived as a material symbol of a social and economic system, they become part of the social discourse reflecting hierarchical modes of social organization and inequalities of power (de Certeau 1998). The commodification of images from vulnerable populations is fraught with issues of power and exploitation. Thus, what superficially looks like the simple provision of an esteem-enhancing artefact to remember a wonderful experience could also be seen as profiteering, if the originators of the imagery do not accumulate any benefits throughout the value chain (Porter 1985). Souvenir items that reify minority groups such as the Indigenous people of Australia, Japan or North America are of interest, especially since they are designed to make a profit and are therefore possible items that exploit Indigenous people, their culture and heritage.

### **Corporate social responsibility in the souvenir industry**

One of the issues that has arguably not been adequately addressed in the widespread and increasing trend towards the establishment of corporate social responsible strategies within tourism organizations (cf. Bohdanowicz 2007; Deery et al. 2007; UNWTO 2005) is that of the use of Indigenous cultural images and objects, such as those already mentioned, by the souvenir industry. Unfortunately, there is also a lack of an agreed framework for exactly what is 'corporate social responsibility' (Horrihan 2007). This has led to a proliferation of actions that may or may not be 'responsible' depending on which stakeholders' considerations are the driving motivation behind the action (Banerjee 2008).

One framework that does offer support for business decision-making is that of ‘ethics’ and ‘ethical behaviour.’ Ethics can be defined as a code of moral principles on which to act or make decisions (Tsalikis and Fritzsche 1989). If embedded appropriately, ethical frameworks can obviate the need for other frameworks (Boyce 2008; Stevens 2008). In the consequentialist framework, an action would be judged to be ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ according to its ‘value’ trade-off (that is; it is not wrong if it does not hurt anyone/anything) (Bentham 1996; Scheffler 1988; Shaver 2004). It can be argued that not many businesses are in a position to make a case based on the intrinsic value of a particular action with the finesse of an ethical philosopher and would prefer a more clearly defined pathway for decision-making. For many, the framework is profit and growth, as the consequences of these are more readily assessable. In many cases, ethics are confounded with morals and there is an assumption that ethical behaviour is intrinsically ‘friendly’ and ‘moral’ (cf. Tsalikis and Fritzsche 1989). However, this may not yet be the case. We believe that ethical decision-making is potentially feasible in business and we support the evolution of models that encompass social ethics in addition to business ethics (cf. Fisscher and Nijhof 2005; Reidenbach and Robin 1990).

A further framework that could be used for decision-making is the legal one (Christensen 2008). Adopting this framework implies that organizations are not able to make moral and ethical decisions with regard to their multiple stakeholders, which given the tensions involved, might easily be the case. As a consequence, business decision-making with regard to Indigenous groups would not be voluntary (legislative framework). Compliance with this framework would be enforced and penalties would be commensurate with the ‘crime.’

This paper seeks to offer a set of guidelines to assist an organization with choosing the ‘best’ decision given the circumstances, and how to make choices when presented with various courses of actions. In spite of dissent amongst scholars about the need to seek answers on decision-making, given the divergent paradigms at play, wise use of research effort is unlikely if the current state of knowledge continues to expand with such rapid diversity.

### **Suggested guidelines for producers of souvenirs**

Given that commodities carry a powerful message to the general public, a set of principles that will guide commercial entities that design and produce souvenirs that relate to Indigenous people are suggested below. These guidelines also consider the notion of the good ‘corporate citizen’ even though corporations are not likely to engage in actions that will marginalize or disadvantage their corporate advantage. Advocates of the implementation of corporate social responsibility in the global business arena indicate that a holistic framework in which social, cultural and political issues, themes and priorities are needed (Boggs in Bannerjee, 2008, p. 29). Therefore, in order for corporations to address social ills, Banerjee’s (2008) notion of social accountability is taken into consideration. The notion of corporate *responsibility* is a legal issue and will produce limited social outcomes, whereas a change of focus to *accountability* is arguably more consistent with revitalizing public opinion and decreasing the power of a corporation to do whatever it sees fit to do in order to reach the primary goal of achieving a profit for itself and its shareholders (ibid.). Therefore, in social accountability, the focus is on *how* a corporation generated profits rather than on the amounts of profits or surplus value the corporation made. In this way, the notion of the corporation as the new colonialist as mentioned by Grice and Humphries (1997) brings issues of exploitation and abusive practices of people out into the open so they can be positively addressed. Given that souvenir items do influence public opinion toward a place and the people represented, it is paramount that a set of socially accountable guidelines be adopted in order to

achieve the goal of reconciliation with the Indigenous people depicted in so many souvenirs from the former colonies around the world.

The set of guidelines we propose relies heavily on a set of ethical principles developed for researchers in anthropology based on the code of ethics established by the American Anthropological Association (Association 2009). This set of guidelines has been adopted because people are the central focus of anthropological research. We believe that in order to address social inequality and cultural marginalization, businesses and economic development must be centered on people rather on profit. The American Anthropological Association has taken on the mission of educating its members about ethical obligations and challenges concerned with the “generation, dissemination and utilization of anthropological knowledge” (Association, 2009, p.1). This Code of ethical principles and guidelines are concerned with the complex involvements and obligations of anthropologists and teachers who undertake projects with people who might be less educated and/or less powerful politically, socially or economically. Similarly, we purport that corporations that focus on social accountability and how their practices affect people will benefit in terms of public opinion which will in turn benefit their profitability. As every situation is different, the Code is designed as a *framework* to be used as a decision-making tool rather than an ironclad formula (ibid.).

In addition to the American Anthropological Association’s Code of ethics, guidelines set up by the Centre for Clinical Research Excellence (CCRE) and the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) to guide medical researchers when undertaking projects or study on Indigenous people in Australia (Fredericks 2008) were also used as a model. These principles require researchers to engage the Indigenous community from the onset. As Fredericks observes, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and indeed, other Indigenous people of the world are used to being the objects of research and are therefore aware of what research entails (ibid., p.1). For this reason, it is considered to be appropriate and necessary to include Indigenous people in the planning and implementation of a project through an inclusive consultation process before conducting research about them. We argue that commercial organizations need to be alert to the demands of good citizenship when designing and producing souvenirs that relate to the reification of Indigenous culture or people for sale to the general public. This scenario is based on the premise that commercially-minded organizations have obligations to the wider society, culture and environment to make a positive contribution to a sustainable peaceful society. We therefore support the notion that decisions of commercial organizations in the souvenir industry should foster the development of social capital rather than being exclusively grounded in the motive of financial gain.

The set guidelines presented below have been modified to assist organizations that design souvenirs for Indigenous or cultural tourism to better focus on the concerns of Indigenous or minority people. The purpose of this code is to provide souvenir organizations with a set of principles for making ethical choices in their selection of designs that relate to Indigenous people and their culture (material and spiritual). As with anthropological and medical research, it is not intended that this set of principles will cover specific situations, but rather provide guidelines to assist organizations or individuals to make ethical decisions about their designs by developing an inclusive approach toward the minority group they undertake to depict in a souvenir item.

## **A. Responsibility to the people with whom and the cultures with which they depict in souvenir items.**

The primary ethical obligation is to the people and materials that are intended for representation in the souvenir item. These obligations can override the goal of making a profit and can lead to a decision to discontinue a design when the primary obligation conflicts with other responsibilities. These ethical obligations include:

1. Actively consult with and engage the indigenous community in the conceptualization and creation of the souvenir item. Confirm support for the design of the souvenir item(s);
2. Agree on strategies and feedback processes for consultation and the verification of information collected perhaps using organizations that the indigenous communities trust;
3. Acknowledge the individual or individuals or Indigenous community for the use of their designs or images for example by offering payment to the community whose designs they used;
4. Agree on how the information will be circulated to the community. Translate if necessary;
5. Ensure you do not harm the dignity or privacy of the people represented in the souvenir item or who might reasonably be affected by the souvenir item;
6. Recognize the cultural distinctiveness of the Indigenous group that the souvenir item represents;
7. Souvenir items should be designed with the idea of helping the majority and Indigenous groups understand each other better;
8. Avoid perpetuating stereotypes of inferiority, expressing certain attitudes and sense of values cast in the mold of the majority. Souvenir items could also be produced that help educate the public about who the Indigenous group are now rather than perpetuate the myths of a romantic, stereotyped and/or made-up image;
9. Organizations that design/produce souvenir items must obtain informed consent of persons being represented or somehow identified by a souvenir design;
10. Designers/producers of souvenir items must adhere to the obligations of openness and informed consent, while carefully and respectfully negotiating the limits of their relationship with the Indigenous group;
11. While organizations that design or produce souvenir items may gain from the sale of the souvenir items, they must not exploit individuals, groups or cultural materials. They should recognize their debt to the societies in which they obtained the designs and their obligation to reciprocate with the people represented in the souvenir item in appropriate ways;
12. Organizations that design/produce souvenir items should not deceive or knowingly misrepresent an Indigenous group.

## **B. Responsibility to the public**

Organizations that are engaged in the design, manufacture and sale of souvenir items that represent Indigenous groups may choose to move beyond disseminating souvenirs to a position of advocacy. This is an organizational decision, but not an ethical responsibility. In the light of the growth of community expectations regarding CSR, it might even be a sound business decision.

## **Conclusion**

This paper proposes a set of ethical guidelines for organizations that design and produce souvenirs that depict the culture and heritage of Indigenous populations has been presented to prevent stereotyping and the exploitation of Indigenous culture by other more commercially

minded individuals or organizations. Although stereotyping and exploitation is most likely unintentional, a framework for an operation based on inclusion has been set up to make sure that potentially vulnerable populations who have been deprived of the right and power to fully participate in an industrial society are consulted about how their designs, image and identity are portrayed in souvenir items. It is envisaged that these guidelines will empower Indigenous groups by providing them with a voice on how their designs, culture and images will be represented for mainstream consumption.

Future research is needed to investigate the perspectives of the souvenir industry and tourists on the code of ethics for the souvenir industry. Since the introduction of such a code could add to the cost of souvenirs, it is envisaged that research needs to be carried out to determine how best to incorporate the ethical guidelines and investigate tourist organizations that already consider the social and cultural impacts of tourism on the host communities.

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