How to Keep Your Indie Cred After Being Acquired

By Jill Krasny

Beer geeks were stunned when Blue Point was purchased by Anheuser-Busch InBev. But with some smart advertising and PR efforts, the newly acquired company won’t have to worry about losing its following.

When beverage giant Anheuser-Busch InBev acquired Blue Point Brewing Company this week, craft beer fans questioned the Long Island, New York brewer’s commitment to being an independent brand. How could Blue Point—which had joked on its blog about soliciting a buyer as part of an April Fool’s stunt in 2011--pull such an about-face?

The fact is, AB InBev needed Blue Point, and Blue Point needed AB InBev. On the corporate side, AB InBev watched in dismay as sales of craft brews grew 16 percent in volume over the last year, while the biggest U.S. beer brands declined 1.7 percent, according to researcher Symphony IRI Group.

Meanwhile, Blue Point was a little guy poised for stardom that couldn’t continue operating as it had been. It needed help to raise its profile, pour money into advertising, and ramp up production.
It's obvious Blue Point will lend some much-needed cool to AB InBev. Blue Point stands to benefit from the deal as well, but it's less apparent how it will retain the indie spirit that made it unique. Is Blue Point, best known for its Toasted Lager, doomed to become another watered-down, mass-produced brew like Budweiser?

"Both companies need to work together very carefully on any new advertising or promotional campaigns that follow--Anheuser-Busch can contribute the dollars and media leverage, but the Blue Point team needs to ensure the message and the tone and manner remain consistent with the way they've communicated in the past," says Denise Lee Yohn, a branding consultant and the author of *What Great Brands Do*. "Don't do what Unilever did when they acquired Ben & Jerry's--they got rid of the very popular ad spokesperson Wendy and that turned fans off immediately."

Yohn says Blue Point--and any other small company that's been acquired by an industry giant--will need to convey to consumers that its DNA hasn't changed. That means taking more risks in messaging, using a bolder logo that a corporation wouldn't necessarily approve of, and not being afraid to "tell your story" whenever you can. "Make sure people know about your roots and values and what really does make you different," she says. "Now is not the time for humility."

Blue Point's founders, Mark Burford and Pete Cotter, seem to be handling their messaging well so far. On Thursday, they posted a note on the company's blog reassuring fans that "We've always focused on our employees, the community, and, of course, the beer--and that will not change." On Twitter, the company took the same tack, tweeting, "We'll keep brewing it if you'll keep drinking it!" and "We only hope to make it better." The company also is staying close to the craft beer enthusiast community by hosting a meet-and-greet with Burford at the Traverse City Microbrew & Music Festival this weekend.

"People continue to want to express themselves through the brands they choose, and by choosing an independent brand, you kind of signal to everyone that you're special," says Yohn, who adds that even national chains are pushing a "local vibe." There are plenty of ways for a small brewer to spin it, whether it's saying you only make small quantities so you can control quality, or that you've stayed local because your hometown's values mirror your own.

Beer geeks were upset when they heard the news about Blue Point, but it's hard to imagine a local investor being able to match Anheuser-Busch InBev's offer or for Blue Point to carry on as it had. Although the change in ownership might put off loyalists, Blue Point has the chance to win over even more fans if it plays up the very qualities that built up its following in the first place.
It's a hard feat for any brand to pull off, but Stella Artois, Corona, and Beck's--all Anheuser-Busch InBev acquisitions--seem to be doing just fine.

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