

## 2018 District VII Awards of Excellence

Digital Communications // Platinum

Entry Title: **MARKETING THE MASCOT MAKEOVER**

VIDEO LINK: <http://news.csusm.edu/a-new-era-of-crash/>

### DESCRIPTION OF INSTITUTION

Building on an innovative 28-year history, California State University San Marcos is a forward-focused institution, dedicated to preparing future leaders, building great communities and solving critical issues. It is the only public four-year comprehensive university serving North San Diego, Southwest Riverside and South Orange counties. The University enrolls 17,000 students. With approximately 2,000 employees, the institution is a Great College to Work For® (The Chronicle of Higher Education). As a recipient of the annual HEED Award since 2014 — a national honor recognizing U.S. colleges and universities that demonstrate an outstanding commitment to diversity and inclusion — CSUSM is committed to creating a diverse and inclusive environment.

### DESCRIPTION OF ENTRY

Following the university's successful transition into NCAA Division II, CSUSM looked to not only elevate its game on the court and on the field, but also on the sidelines by formally moving its mascot, Crash the Cougar, to Athletics. But there were a few challenges.

Crash the Cougar was established at CSUSM in 2004 by Associated Students, Inc. (student government) to be the embodiment of school spirit. The mascot suit was purchased "off the shelf" at a budget price point. While athletic programs continued to grow, Crash was primarily a student life mascot, appearing at any student life function, and occasionally athletic games. Mascot training was rare, if at all. The restrictive range of motion for the suit was challenging; pumping up a crowd was difficult. Consistency in the mannerisms or even in the height of the mascot varied. Most importantly, the mascot never "looked" like the CSUSM brand; other than the shirt Crash wore, nothing distinguished the cougar mascot as belonging to CSUSM. In fact, other campuses owned the same mascot suit.

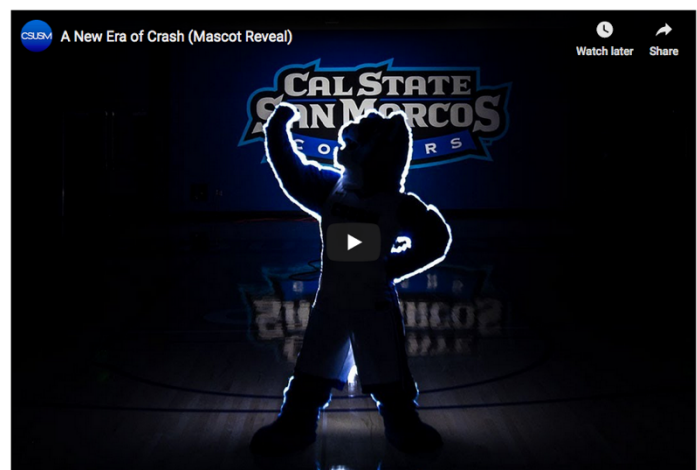
When top administrators decided that the NCAA Division II membership was also an ideal time to move Crash to Athletics, it was also time for a redesign. Redesign can be a dirty word. For a young university, not yet 30 years old, the tan, cuddly Crash was all students and alumni had known.

A committee was formed, led by Athletics in partnership with the Office of Communications. After consulting with students in focus groups, the university contracted with Alinco, a renowned design agency responsible for many NBA, NHL and NCAA DI schools' mascots to design a suit that would fit the needs of the spirit program and have a custom look that embodied the brand of CSUSM.

An integral part of the publicity strategy was unveiling the makeover in a video, which would be shown at Cougar Madness, the university's Midnight Madness pep rally, in front of a thousand fans just before the new Crash made its debut.

### USE OF INNOVATION

Most videos about mascot makeovers drag on (often 3+ minutes in length) and, frankly, are lackluster. Too often, the original mascot is portrayed as old, weak, or sad. That just isn't the culture of CSUSM. Crash was still a beloved member of our campus. We wanted to show why we were making the change: (1) to look like our





spirit/athletics brand and (2) to give the mascot better range of motion; but also, set the tone that the change was a good and positive change.

A closely storyboarded video that was playful and positive in tone was our strategy.

As production of the suit began, the Office of Communications knew how the university shared the story of its new Crash would greatly influence how Crash was received. The Office of Communications set out to tell the story of a “New Era of Crash” with a strategic vision, purposeful attention to detail, and high production value, all within a tight one-minute package – and from vision to completion, a one-week turnaround!

From the beginning, we knew our mascot needed to transform from its current condition into a new, improved version. To do that, we wanted to show an evolution of Crash, not a replacement. We also did not want the mascot to be sad, weak, frustrated, or downtrodden through that experience; the desire to change needed to come from within and the mascot needed to show resilience and perseverance, both of which are branded values associated with the Cal State San Marcos Cougars.

In addition to the video, social media teasers as well as the reveal were posted on the university’s main social media accounts. Footage was sent to, and aired, on local broadcast news stations. The reveal was also featured in the university’s alumni magazine, Steps Magazine.

## **OBJECTIVES**

First impressions are powerful. Crafting the right tone in teasers and a promotional video was critical. To help make the transition successful, we looked for innovative ways to do a video differently that was fun but also very deliberate in its messaging. The video had two goals: (1) communicate the primary motivations for the change (to both look like our spirit/athletics brand and to give the mascot better athleticism) and (2) set the tone that the change is a positive rite of passage for our growing institution.

We achieved those objectives through deliberate storyboarding of a video. Every scene, every detail was intentional and communicated a piece of the overarching message.

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## **THE MEANING BEHIND EACH SCENE**

Scene 1: Crash wakes up in the Sports Center: This scene is a nod to Crash’s new home within the Sports Center – the home of CSUSM Athletics. Previously Crash was part of Associated Students, Inc., and often linked to student-life initiatives.

Scene 2: Crash runs Mangrum Track: Crash joins track athletes and CSUSM’s first sports coach, Olympian Steve Scott, on Mangrum Track, the first athletic venue on campus. The scene demonstrates confidence from the coaching staff in helping Crash work toward this new goal.

Scene 3: Crash runs drills in newest facility: Continuing from the oldest to newest facility, Crash works out in the Air Fitness Center, a CrossFit-style strength and conditioning venue for athletes. The new suit would showcase a more toned and fit cougar, so building up muscle became part of the message.

Scene 4: Crash as a third base coach: Mascots are the heart of the action, rallying fans to cheer on athletes to victory. Demonstrating the importance of that role within athletics, Crash enthusiastically signals a softball runner to advance to home plate.

Scene 5: Crash Works on Being Fierce: In designing a new suit for Crash, we wanted to make Crash fiercer, more competitive and less of a teddy bear. In this scene, the president of BLU CRU, our student spirit organization, demonstrates growling and game-face intimidation tactics, encouraging Crash to dig deep within.



Scene 6: Cheering on Crash: The key to the transformation – and the tone we set out to create – was that Crash wanted this . . . not administration. Here, Crash joins the strength and conditioning coach and baseball team, who are cheering on as Crash successfully completes pullups.

Scene 7: Crash Learns New Moves: The old suit had limited maneuverability with an oversized head, large feet, and no hardware or straps keeping the mascot together; the new suit would allow for tumbling, more controlled movements, and faster speeds. This scene shows Crash observing a cheer team tumbler and attempting some moves.

Scene 8: Crash's Motivation: This scene reveals the deepest motivation for the transformation: to more closely resemble the athletic logo (a fierce, open-mouthed, blue cougar). This scene shows the hard work Crash has been putting in (the blood, sweat and tears) as the mascot returns to the locker room and sees the motivation taped within the locker door: the CSUSM spirit (athletic) logo.

Scene 9: Cougar Blue Spray Tan: Perhaps the biggest transformation is Crash's new color – from tan to blue. It's common to see members of the BLU CRU painted blue for home openers, rivalry games and Homecoming. Connecting to the concept of a spray tan booth, the men's soccer team captain comes out of the booth painted blue, appearing to have been sprayed blue by the spirit programs coordinator. Crash enters the booth – excited. The scene then cuts to blue paint being sprayed onto a sheet of glass, giving the perspective of Crash being sprayed blue, but without damaging the suit, since it was to be archived by the university historian.

Scene 10: The Drama of the Reveal: A fierce silhouette passes through a single light in the dark Sports Center. This video debuted at Cougar Madness, a late-night spirited pep rally kicking off basketball season. This scene closely resembled that environment, as it was the last and final scene before the lights flash on to reveal the dawning of a new, fierce, spirited, high energy, strong and blue Crash the Cougar.

## **TARGET AUDIENCE**

The committee behind this initiative cared deeply about the reaction from our more than 15,000 students, 2,000+ employees and 35,000+ alumni. We wanted the new Crash to be embraced while preserving fan affinity for CSUSM. We also wanted to draw attention to this exciting moment in our athletic history: becoming an official member of NCAA DII.

Student focus groups provided initial feedback on the design. The committee met frequently to monitor the development and establish a communications plan leading up to the reveal. In storyboarding the video, we continued to think proactively about what tone and message we wanted to share and have portrayed throughout the video. Each scene worked to consider the emotional needs of our targeted audiences. See "OBJECTIVES" for more ways the video worked to address and meet the needs of these unique groups.

Hype photos were shared the day of the reveal, drawing a record attendance to the university's annual Midnight Madness pep rally. The video premiered that night at the event, right before the new Crash was revealed. Immediately following the event, video teasers directed social media followers to the link to see the redesigned mascot.

## **BUDGET**

The concept for the video was developed and produced by Creative Communications Officer Christine Vaughan and filmed and edited by video interns Kyle Hulse and Mason Broadway, all within one week. Athletics staff, coaches and athletes, and members of the Office of Communications, assisted in the production of the video. Total expenses for the video was \$550 (\$50 for music and \$500 for internship wages). The Crash Mascot Committee was led by Athletics and involved representation from the Office of Communications, Student Life and Leadership, Associated Students, Inc. and members of the Traditions Committee. The cost to design and construct the new mascot suit was \$8,750 from Alinco.



## **RESULTS AND IMPACT**

"A New Era of Crash" is a gold standard in the niche of mascot reveal videos and a best practice in how digital communications can positively frame perceptions. The video is a powerful case study to glean lessons of rebranding, as this video demonstrates that effective storytelling can be playful while still being purposeful and can be complete while still being concise. And it worked. "A New Era of Crash" outperformed other social media videos with 5,399 views on Facebook (the sixth most watched video at the time of its release), 493 engagements on Facebook, and 2,590 views on YouTube, making it CSUSM's most viewed YouTube video of 2017.

Now, the university mascot – Crash the Cougar – is uniquely CSUSM. The brand is cohesive. Crash is also part of the Athletics Spirit Program with Dance and Cheer, and able to perform dances, acrobatic maneuvers, and serve as a fierce ambassador and top competitor for our campus.



## A New Era of Crash

By Katie Chappell & Christine Vaughan

Amid the excited roars of over 1,000 students and fans at Cougar Madness, CSUSM's mascot debuted with a new look, feel and attitude, ready to help athletics compete to their full potential in NCAA Division II.

Crash the Cougar surprised the crowd when the new mascot took to the court following the team introductions during the late-night pep rally that kicked off the basketball season.

"We are excited to embrace our new Crash and continue campus tradition, while also bringing in a new look and feel that aligns with our Cougar spirit logo and the NCAA brand," said Ath-

letics Director Jennifer Milo.

Crash was first brought to life by Associated Students, Inc. in 2004 with a student vote and has served CSUSM as the campus life mascot for 13 years. With the inaugural season as a full NCAA member, CSUSM officially moved Crash within Cougar Athletics. As part of that transition, students were consulted to create a design that embodies the athletics brand, unifies fan support and elevates the athleticism of the mascot.

"As important representatives of universities, mascots provide energy to athletic games as fierce but friendly

competitors and champions for their teams," said Ashley Eszlinger, CSUSM's spirit programs coordinator.

Some fun facts about the new Crash mascot include:

Crash is now spirit blue and resembles the Cougar Athletics logo  
 Crash's more proportionate body allows for tumbling maneuvers  
 The suit was custom made for CSUSM by Alinco, a renowned design agency responsible for many NBA, NHL and NCAA DI schools' mascots  
 Crash remains gender non-conforming to represent all students