



Experts offer advice for Phoenix Suns after Warriors blowout

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Phoenix Suns are celebrating their 50th season.
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The Phoenix Suns and their brand are in a viral spotlight of sorts after Golden State Warriors coach Steve Kerr let his players run timeouts and draw up plays in the latter stages of a 123-89 blowout of the Suns on Monday.

National sports talk shows still debating Kerr's move and the sometimes lopsided nature of the NBA most of the week.

The Suns have 41 losses on the year so far and just 18 wins. The team is tied with the Atlanta Hawks for the worst record in the National Basketball Association.

The Suns haven't been in the NBA Playoffs since 2010, despite the team's financial value rising. The Suns are worth \$1.28 billion, according to valuation estimates from *Forbes* magazine.

An ownership group led by [Robert Sarver](#) bought the Suns for \$401 million in 2004.

The Suns – which was Phoenix's first major pro sports team joining the NBA in 1968 – was a title contender during the playing days of [Charles Barkley](#) and later [Steve Nash](#).

So how can the Suns turnaround their brand and image beyond winning on the court and not getting blown out by 40 points or more four times in one season?

Local sports marketing and advertising executives offer some ideas and insight.

"It would be incorrect to say that the Suns' brand is linked 100 percent to winning," Aric Zion, CEO of the [Zion & Zion](#) public relations and advertising.

Zion said pro sports teams can be lovable losers but the problem with the Suns stems from perceptions of the team's ownership.

"When (Jerry) Colangelo ran the Suns, they were fairly popular even when they were losing – that is because it was generally seen that Colangelo cared about the team, and he tried to win," Zion said.

Colangelo – who owned both the Suns and Arizona Diamondbacks – has always been popular in local circles.



Arie Zion

Sarver and his family do a lot of charitable work and philanthropy, as well as community lending through Western Alliance Bancorp. (NYSE: WAL). Sarver, the Suns managing partner, is the Phoenix-based bank's chairman.

But the Suns have significant turnover on and off the court and what will be an eight-year playoff drought wears on a fan base.

"No fancy branding tagline or advertising campaign will do the trick," Zion said. "The best thing for the Suns would be for some civic-minded people (businessmen, celebrities, sports legends, etc.) to buy the Suns."

The Suns announced home attendance this year averages 16,581 per game, according to ESPN. That ranks 23rd out of the NBA's 30 teams. That compares to 17,283 fans per game at Suns home last season. The Suns averaged 17,648 fans per home game in 2010, according to ESPN. The Suns ranked 16th in attendance in 2010 and 19th last season.

We reached out to the Suns to see if they wanted to comment but haven't heard back yet. Attempts to reach Sarver also were not successful.



Charlotte Shaff, president, The Media Push

Charlotte Shaff, owner of the [Media Push](#) marketing firm, said the Suns lack recognizable players in an NBA built around star players and teams.

“Ask most anyone who lives in the Valley who is on the Suns team and I bet you they can’t name more than one if any,” she said. “Find someone who we can connect with and cheer for and be proud of and promote the heck out of him and the team.”

[Scott Harkey](#) and [Matt Owens](#), principal executives OH Partners advertising in Phoenix, said beyond improving the on-court product and getting back into the NBA playoffs, the team needs to improve their messaging and be more authentic about it with fans.

“You can message a rebuild for three to five years, but if a clear plan is not laid out customers and fans lose confidence and credibility,” Harkey said. “If an organization loses credibility, fans lose hope. Brands live on hope and credibility.”

Owens said the Suns ownership needs to stay in the background.

“In my opinion there isn’t a lot they can do. Ownership and the business side of the organization need to be completely silent. Let the coach be the face and focus on developing talent and building a core of great players,” he said, adding that the Suns don’t look like they have a real and consistent rebuilding plan.



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