

ANCHORAGE DAILY NEWS

Alaska Airlines apologizes, removes 'Meet our Eskimo' phrase from website

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After an outcry from members of the Alaska Native community, Alaska Airlines has removed the line "Meet our Eskimo" and replaced it with "Meet the Eskimo" on its website, alongside the airline's updated branding it unveiled earlier this week.

The phrase referenced a slight redesign of the iconic image on the tail of Alaska Airlines' aircraft, an Alaska Native's visage long referred to as the Eskimo.

"When Alaska Airlines unveiled our refreshed brand earlier this week, a reference we used, 'Meet our Eskimo,' offended many in the Alaska Native community, and likely others," said Alaska Air Group CEO Brad Tilden in a statement. "We apologize and take full responsibility for this insensitive reference."

The company replaced "our" with "the" early Thursday morning, but the line had already touched off a discussion among Alaska Natives and others about its appropriateness and the general use of an unnamed Alaska Native as the Alaska Airlines logo.

Many Alaska Natives spoke up on social media about the use of the word "our." Several posts on Facebook and Twitter criticized the company -- alongside a screenshot of the offending phrase on the company's website -- for implying ownership over an indigenous person.

Annie Wilcoxson Wenstrup lives in Fairbanks, and is one of the Alaska Natives who penned a Facebook post on the matter.

"I want to like your new rebranding campaign," wrote Wenstrup, a 29-year-old Athabascan, in a post that began "Dear Alaska Airlines." But, she said, "Claiming the image of an indigenous person is troubling enough. The possessiveness of your 'Meet Our Eskimo' is dehumanizing."

And that's not the only issue, she said later in a phone interview with Alaska Dispatch News.

"I think it's time to start phasing (the Eskimo logo) out," she said. "I think it has a lot of warm and fuzzy feelings because we're used to it, but you're using a minority's image to support a corporate brand, and they're profiting off that."

Wenstrup created an online petition Thursday, asking Alaska Airlines to "pull their images with the wording 'Meet our Eskimo.'" By Thursday evening, the petition had 165 supporters.

On Twitter, one person said "I'm not your Eskimo, @AlaskaAir. I'm Inupiaq." Another wrote "No, @AlaskaAir ... you don't own an Eskimo." A third simply wrote "#notyoureskimo," directed at the airline's Twitter account.

Wenstrup and others also say the use of the word "Eskimo" is problematic or offensive on its own.

Reactions to the term vary among Alaska Natives. Perry Eaton, a 70-year-old Alutiiq artist from Kodiak Island who now lives in Anchorage, said he doesn't think there's an issue with using the word.

"I'm in a generation where, I've heard comments about whether the Eskimo image and the word 'Eskimo' is appropriate, and I'm sort of the opinion of 'history is history.' And I am not offended," Eaton told Alaska Dispatch News earlier this week.

Another person thanked Alaska Airlines on Instagram, saying, "Once again thank you for being there for 'our people,'" alongside a screenshot of the "Meet our Eskimo" line.

Maria Shaa Tlaa Williams, director of the Alaska Native Studies program at the University of Alaska Anchorage and Tlingit, said in an email the broader issue is about the use of "a somewhat antiquated word."

"(Eskimo) is a colonial term and it should be: Inupiaq, Yup'ik/Cup'ik, Siberian Yupik or even Inuit, or even generic term such as Alaska Native," she said.

Bobbie Egan, media relations director for Alaska Airlines, said the company made the decision to keep using the word "Eskimo" after conducting focus groups with Native leaders throughout Alaska, but she did not have details about those focus group results.

"Many of our employees and customers commonly refer to themselves as Eskimo and we've always sought the input and counsel of employees and customers," she said.

Tiffany Zulkosky, a 31-year-old Yup'ik woman from Bethel now living in Anchorage, was another person who wrote to Alaska Airlines on Facebook, where she said she was disappointed in the company's choice of words, but told Alaska Dispatch News that the discussion about it is also complex.

"There's a lot of people who feel very differently about the vernacular. In the Alaska Native community, in any family, there's going to be disagreements," Zulkosky said. "This can be really difficult. Race or racial issues can be a challenging conversation happening in our public sphere."

She thinks the intent behind Alaska Airlines' campaign was a good one, it just didn't come across the way they wanted it to.

When asked whether she took issue more with the word "our" or the use of the word "Eskimo," she said it's "hard to summarize how I feel about it in a sentence. I think it's a little bit of both."

At least two Alaska Natives have also called for the company to attend the First Alaskans Racial Equity Summit happening in Anchorage next week. A company spokeswoman did not respond to a question by deadline about whether the company would attend.

In the statement provided by Alaska Airlines Thursday, CEO Tilden said the company will strive to keep working with the Alaska Native community in the future.

"All of us at Alaska Airlines have been honored to have the Eskimo, as this iconic symbol has been known by Native and non-Native alike for over 40 years, prominently displayed on our aircraft to symbolize strength, courage and optimism," Tilden said. "We are grateful for our very long standing ties to the Alaska Native community which we will strive to strengthen and deepen in the years ahead."

About this Author

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Annie Zak covers business news and general assignments. She joined the Daily News in 2015 and previously was a reporter at the Puget Sound Business Journal in Seattle and the Orange County Register in California.

Comments