



SO IT'S AN INDIAN PRODUCT...

# So What?

BY GLENN C. ZARING

Whatever your product, chances are that someone else can make a comparable product to be bought for less money. So, why should people buy products from American Indians?

Consider this: If I reach out to my left, there is a hand drum sitting next to me in my office. When I look at it, I smile and have warm memories – and not because of the construction of the drum or memories of its voice. Those feelings are because of my connotation of that drum with the dear Ottawa lady who made it for me. Her face and “presence” come with that drum.

If I reach out to my right, there is a beautifully beaded, padded turtle on deerskin. When I touch it, I am reminded of the Nishnaabe friend who made it for me following many delightful conversations about “being Indian” and what it meant to us. She is a member of the Turtle Clan.

To be successful, the products or services that we sell should be more than just well-made and functional. They should also bring precious memories to those who purchase them. While this is obviously true for American Indian art and crafts, consider that the philosophy of increasing the value of our products with a “human face” is actually a unique selling proposition for any successful tribal business.

Customers have myriad choices when it comes to buying things. From Dollar Tree to Walgreens, items are for sale everywhere. What makes any of them

different from or better than their competitors? Is it just the battle between the one that can provide the best discount? Or is it something more?

In my small town, we have a new big-box store that is top-of-the-line – very nice, clean, well-stocked and all that. We also have a health food store that is small, crowded and not inexpensive by any stretch.

Consider the purchase of a jar of honey. The box store has a number of different brands and sizes (including the little plastic honey bear container ones). The health food store has a single supplier from a farm near town. There are two sizes of jars and for variety, you can get them either strained or raw...you know, with bits of wax and bee parts floating around. Guess where I buy mine? Why?

When I reach for the honey jar in the mornings, I am doing more than just getting some sweetener for my tea, the face of the health food store owner and memories of our conversations come to mind as I bring that jar down from the shelf. These memories make my morning cup more pleasant by far. Add to it that by purchasing this particular product, I am supporting a local farmer and a local merchant.

When you and your tribe are contemplating producing a product or service for sale to the outside world, consider how you can make your product more valuable to the consumer. How can your

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product bring a warm memory to your customers whenever they use it?

Consider adding a “tribal element” to the product for that added bit of pizzazz, which will make the product meaningful. Maybe it can have a bit of history or culture printed on the label. For example, if your tribe is into wild rice harvest as a product, could you have a picture of a traditional harvest scene? Maybe it will link to a website or podcast showing videos of the actual process along with a bit of history of your tribe and rice. It could be as simple as having something of tribal significance as part of the packaging. A small card (or one of those folding labels) that could share a teaching about the Seven Grandfathers?

Adding this cultural element will increase the value and, thus, the cost of the product in most cases. But think about the benefits! Customers will be able to learn more about the tribe or indigenous people who produced it; you will be able to improve public relations with associated marketing opportunities based upon your “tribal product”; and you will build improved brand awareness by expanding upon the “tribal-ness” of the product.

When customers reach for your product, they will have the warm thoughts of those who produced it. That will translate into higher sales volume and success for what you do. ♦

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