

Communication is Not Optional

FOUR LESSONS LEARNED

BY GLENN ZARING

During my many years as a journalist and then as a public affairs director of a tribe, I have learned some important lessons along the way.

1. THE (TRIBAL) TOWER OF BABEL

Years ago, while living in West Berlin, Germany, I had a favorite restaurant in Steglitz. I also had a favorite waiter, Antonio. The one problem, though, was neither one of us spoke enough of the other's native language to fully communicate in it. We solved the problem by having conversations in a mix of German, English and Italian. We saw the challenge and we figured out how to handle it effectively. The benefit of our arrangement was that when Antonio opened his own restaurant, he could let me know. He had a ready-made customer and I had a comfortable place where I was a friend of the owner. We both won!

In the tribal nations, we are proud of our languages. They define us and give us a base upon which to build a life and to have meaning. But, like Antonio and me, not everybody speaks the same language. This is a challenge that must be recognized and dealt with if we expect to grow tribal businesses that interact successfully outside of our own communities.

2. THEY NEED TO LEARN OUR LANGUAGE!

As Native Americans, we take pride in our languages. And because of this pride, we often feel that outsiders should make the effort to learn to communicate with us using our language. While that desire is understandable, we have to analyze what our purpose is with our tribal business. Is it to forcefully spread our culture? Is it to gain greater acceptance of our tribal identity? Or is it to make our tribal business successful and thus help our people? There is no wrong answer; it is just a choice that you have to make. Based on that choice, there is one overarching principle that should guide how you approach your business: The customer, or intended customer, must clearly understand what you are saying, what you are offering and what it can do for their business. Without this understanding, you have lost before you have even started.

3. DO THEY HEAR THE MESSAGE?

Tribal businesses need customers. To win customers and to keep them, you must establish a good method of communication. Ask yourself questions about your potential customers. Do you really know what they do and what they need to be successful? What can

your tribal business bring to the table that will help them be successful? How do you communicate to them the advantages of doing business with your tribal organization? You might have the best product or service on the market – and it might be just what your customers need to be successful – but if your communication cannot convey this, you will never have the opportunity to prove it to them and your business will fail.

4. PUBLIC AFFAIRS PROFESSIONALS... YOUR SECRET WEAPON!

Having someone on staff or on call that can help with this communication challenge can save a lot of heartache and money. It can also help your tribal business (and, indeed, your tribal nation) to succeed.

Let's be honest here. You can have what you, your secretary, Aunt Katie down at the Chapter House and your wife's second cousin feel is a great message about the new tribal business. But if your potential customer cannot easily understand the message, you do not get the business. It is that simple.

Have someone help who understands the public affairs spectrum. Have them not just review the message, but also the potential customers. Let them dig in a bit to learn what is driving the customers, what their true needs are, and then have the public affairs office come up with a communication strategy based on this research. Get the advertising and marketing folks involved, but first provide them with the communication strategy if you want to get good results. They can make it pretty, but you can make it succeed. ♦

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