

# It's on the Website

## (...and Why That's Not Enough)

BY GLENN C. ZARING

For a variety of reasons, a non-Native entity may have difficulty identifying the appropriate tribal official to contact within a tribe. This dilemma may involve governmental agencies and administrators when they work with a tribal nation. It may involve getting fair news coverage.

Who can connect you with the right people and offices?

The problem is that in 2016, we try to answer that question... with just a website!

While websites can be colorful, interactive and informational, I long for the days when you could call someone at an office (usually the longtime receptionist or the secretary who knew everybody and everything about the place). One phone call could put you on the right track to find what you need. It could also communicate the rest of the story in ways that no shiny computer screen ever can.

Here's an example from Indian Country. Not too many years ago, I could go down to the community center and ask Aunt Katie about something from the tribal past. She could tell me about what had gone on long before the U.S. government had said, "Yes, you are really a tribe." Her answer would usually be humorous and would probably be laced with a lesson for me. But she would give me the answer in such a way that I'd never forget it.

Now, most of the time, we are told to go to a website to find the information we need. The words are there if you can

find them; the spirit, however, is not.

A tribal friend from Minnesota always says, "There are 567 different tribes in the U.S., and they are all different." He is quite right, and that is one of the challenges for tribal businesses. It is also one of the beauties as we enter the corporate business world; it sets tribal nations and businesses apart and that can become our competitive advantage.

In 2004, when starting the Public Affairs Office for a sovereign tribal nation, the caveat to me from our Chief was: "Get our communications under control!"

Our situation had those from outside the tribe contacting unauthorized individuals or people who had no idea how to handle the inquiry. That led to incorrect or problematic answers both economically and politically. As an example, we were a fishing tribe with commercial fishing boats plying the waters of the Great Lakes. Reporters were used to verbally "ambushing" tribal fishers and then twisting their answers to make the tribe, and Indians in general, look bad.

Internally, we had no controls or guidelines set up for the dissemination of information. Various departments could put out their own message without making sure that it was accurate or if it meshed well or properly with the rest of the tribal team.

From a journalistic view, local reporters had their favorite tribal contacts. Of course, these contacts really enjoyed being an informed source...



They just didn't always have the right information and didn't know how to keep it as part of the overall message of the tribal nation.

What was needed was a streamlining of the information system, both incoming and outgoing. Our answer was to make the PAO the clearing house for both sides of the communication connection.

First, we went to newsrooms and government and corporate offices and did a "sales job" on them to train them to contact the PAO whenever they had questions or needed information. We needed them to establish a communication habit of coming to the PAO right out of the gate.

On the tribal side, the office also set up a system to quickly answer questions when they came in. Everything possible was done to frame those answers in a way that they supported the overall message of the tribe.

A nice-looking website is a fantastic tool, but tribal nations are different. What we do has a personal, cultural element that nontribal entities wish they had. Having an effective communication team in place to share that difference, while at the same time providing correct information, can make working with us a beautiful and rewarding experience.

That should be our goal. ♦

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