



National
Congress of
American
Indians

NATIVE ORGANIZATIONS:

WORKING TOGETHER FOR OUR COMMON BENEFIT

DEVELOPED IN PARTNERSHIP WITH



PYRAMID COMMUNICATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

On November 14, 2010, 45 people gathered in Albuquerque, New Mexico, at the National Congress of American Indians' Annual Convention to participate in the pre-session, Native Organizations: Working Together for Our Common Benefit.

This session was in follow-up to an inaugural session of Native organizations convened at the 2009 NCAI Annual Convention in Palm Springs, California. Native organizations at the tribal, state, regional and national levels provide a web of vital services that help and work in concert with tribal governments. These infrastructure organizations rarely have the opportunity to come together with peers to exchange promising practices, collaborate on efforts and communicate more deliberately.

Two areas of interest identified at the inaugural session were effective communications and resource development. The 2010 session was designed to address these two areas. Participants heard from John Hoyt, Nicole Adams and Kara Briggs of Pyramid Communications, who facilitated an interactive discussion on ways to identify shared messages, increase unity around common messages and improve the overall communications capacity of Native organizations. Following on the theme of effective messaging. First Nations Development Institute's president, Michael Roberts, presented on new developments in Native philanthropy and fundraising.

Participants were representatives of tribes, tribal governments, tribal non-governmental organizations, academia and the federal government. They provided regional and national perspectives on messages about Indian Country that do and do not break through to larger audiences. Subsequently, participants discussed the need for solution-based messaging as well as the need to pay at least as much attention to the method of communication as to the message.

Underlying the discussion of common misperceptions of Indian Country was the theme that there is a need for a joint messaging effort for Indian Country. The following is a recap of the key points and findings from the four-hour session that was facilitated by Pyramid Communications.



PERCEPTION IS EVERYTHING

But where do American perceptions for American Indians derive? Schooling, historic literature and popular media are a few of the sources of these perceptions.

In this area of tribal communications professionals, Native media and the Internet, perceptions might really be only missed opportunities for informing and educating people about who Indian tribes are now, and in the past.

The challenge for us is identifying the good messages that will resonate beyond misperceptions, or will correct wrong ideas. Let's begin with a list of common misunderstanding for which Indian Country needs messaging.

THESE MISPERCEPTIONS INCLUDE:

- American Indians are extinct or relics of the past, who wear only beads, buckskin and feathers
- American Indians are made personally rich by distributions of money from tribal casinos, tribal governments and the U.S. government
- American Indian tribes are corrupt and cannot manage businesses
- Tribal casinos pay for programs, services and non-profits in all of Indian Country
- There is no need for outside philanthropy in Indian Country because revenue from gaming is meeting all the needs
- All tribes have casinos, which are all highly successful
- American Indians do not pay any taxes
- American Indians are all alcoholics
- All American Indians live on reservations, therefore all need is on reservations
- Because all American Indians live on reservations, urban Natives are invisible or misidentified as other ethnicities
- The past dictates the future will be bleak in Indian Country
- American Indians should communicate their stories through the lens of, and in response to, mainstream perceptions only. There is no audience for stories told in their own voice.



MESSAGES THAT BREAK THROUGH

Good messages paint visions of the future and reflect common or complementary goals. To be effective, break-through messaging must be solution-based. Some Indian tribes and organizations have individually had successful messaging campaigns by keeping ideas at a high level and using plain language. The best messages make connections between groups of people, draw from what is familiar and describe successes. When messaging needs to address an issue or a problem, a simple formula of positive message, negative message, positive message, followed by the presentation of the issue and a solution at the end is helpful.

IMPORTANT THEMES FOR MESSAGING ARE:

- We are neighbors and have the same hopes and concerns as you do.
- We seek to continue to take care of our people and our children, just like you.
- We are part of the fabric of this community—We are interested in the success of our community just like you are.
- Let's work toward the common good—If we work together, and toward the same goal, we will better our community.
- We have the same or similar goals—The barriers that divide us are not as great as the goals that unite us.
- If tribal nations are strong, America is strong.
- We can accomplish a great deal if we work together.



MESSAGES THAT DON'T BREAK THROUGH

Indian tribes are by necessity engaged in complex inter-governmental dialogues with the state and federal governments. But ideas of governance, the use of bureaucratic language, jargon and government acronyms often get in the way of messaging for public understanding. Even the importance of the concepts does not make them effective messaging to an uninformed public, or even an uninformed political leadership.

THE FOLLOWING WERE IDENTIFIED AS ISSUES THAT ARE DIFFICULT TO COMMUNICATE TO VARIOUS AUDIENCES:

- Sovereignty
- Trust reform
- Jurisdiction
- Gaming
- Treaty rights and other concepts of nations-within-nations legal status
- Tribal governance
- American Indians “walk in two worlds,” educated in both the academic sense as well as in cultural and traditional knowledge
- Because of American Indian’s unique legal status, leaders are considered heads of states/ dignitaries



BARRIERS TO MESSAGING AND UNDERSTANDING

American Indians are often the subject of messaging by other people, and American Indian messages are commonly misunderstood by the mainstream news media. Indian tribal governments sometimes create their own internal barriers to good messaging through policies and procedures that bog down communications, including requiring legal review or council approval of even simple communications. These kinds of reviews and approvals can delay and overcomplicate messaging.

TYPES OF BARRIERS ENCOUNTERED BY PARTICIPANTS INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING:

- The news media does not report the tribal messaging or counters it with disproportionate opposition.
- Tribal communications staff are not consulted on potentially controversial decisions early enough to prepare messaging or explanations that might put the tribe in a better light. Tribal administrative staff can be key to ensuring the left hand knows what the right hand is doing.
- Tribes that have more resources are challenged with “why aren’t you helping out other tribes that have more needs?”
- Indian Country, with 565 federally recognized tribes who have distinct cultures, languages and geographies, is portrayed as uniform.
- Some charities portray Indian Country as weak or needy, while not actually providing any support to Indian causes.
- Native organizations and tribes mistrust institutions, and institutions mistrust us.
- Tribal members are not “just members”; as citizens, they play a huge part in the accomplishments of their communities.
- American Indians are always on the defense; there is little printed about our future that is positive.



EFFECTIVE MESSAGE DELIVERY ELEMENTS

Powerful messaging will not reach its audience if it is not delivered in the most effective way possible. Sometimes different delivery methods are used for different audiences. For a major undertaking, winning over a tribal citizenry is as important as communicating with mainstream audiences. It may take repetition for audiences to understand the message being delivered; multiple mediums may be necessary.

SOME ELEMENTS IDENTIFIED WERE:

MEDIUMS

- Word of mouth
- Public meetings with meeting minutes widely disseminated
- Posters and fliers
- Strategic web presence with full use of multi-media, dynamic content that is current
- Social media (Facebook, Twitter, RSS feeds, Youtube)
- Tribal newspapers, newsletters and radio stations
- Letters to the editor and op-eds
- Buy broadcast media time or newspaper ad space

TOOLS

- Data (facts that can be sourced)
- Scripts, handouts, news releases, white papers, histories
- Grassroots networks
- Established relationships with news media professionals

METHODS

- Relate in common language, with tribal reference points that the mainstream understands
- Clearly state principles you stand for
- Deliver one strong message; repeat that message at the beginning, in the middle and at the end
- Consider what the result should be, and use that to evaluate your effectiveness
- Work with other tribal organizations



DEVELOPMENT AND FUNDRAISING

Across Indian Country and throughout tribal governments, developing grant applications and raising dollars for programs is a necessity. Often, tribes and tribal organizations find themselves having to explain that the success of a tribal gaming enterprise does not affect poverty in other tribes, or even cover all the needs for support in tribes with casinos and other economic development enterprises.

A common misperception in the general public, and with some in private philanthropy, is that gaming revenue is meeting all of the need in Indian Country. Mike Roberts identified core fundraising messages and highlighted the need for verifying the credibility of charities. In addition, he spoke about one of the promising models for raising money in Indian Country, Native Ways Federation—a workplace-giving effort that is currently being developed and tested with a group of tribal employers and seven tribal organizations. Native Ways Federation is developing a set of standards for accreditation of Native organizations, as unscrupulous charities often use negative messaging about Native people to solicit funds.

MESSAGING FOR NEED AND OPPORTUNITY

- American Indians are the most in need, but are the least served of any U.S. population
- American Indian non-profits increasingly fill the gaps where the federal government fails to fulfill its trust responsibility
- Only 1/6 of one percent of national philanthropic dollars goes to Native causes
- As tribes grow their capacity to be major employers, there is ample opportunity to tap this resource of individual donors and direct this funding to Native issues

NATIVE WAYS WORKPLACE GIVING

- Workplace giving campaigns provide sustainable sources of revenue, and a service to donors
- Native Ways benefits Native non-profits and operates in Native businesses, enterprises and operations

NATIVE WAYS FEDERATION STANDARDS

- Without a resource to confirm the legitimacy of an organization and its efficacy in Indian Country, donors may unknowingly support unscrupulous charities
- Native Ways has established a rigorous set of criteria for accreditation
- Native Ways covers the governance, mission, transparency and accountability of charities



NEXT STEPS

Indian Country needs more united efforts, whether that means unity among Indian non-profit organizations or a unified communications campaign. The stereotypes that plague Indian Country are long standing and broad based. To counteract them, Indian nations and organizations need to work together in an organized manner that respects differences of culture, values and geography. Clear, positive and straightforward messaging can bridge the divides and bring understanding of Indian tribes to America.

SOME OF THE RECOMMENDED “NEXT STEPS” DISCUSSED BY PARTICIPANTS INCLUDED:

- Build an inter-tribal, national public relations campaign
- Develop an Indians Nations 101 curricula for incoming tribal council members, government officials and others whose work brings them into Indian Country
- Inform incoming freshmen Congressional members and other newly elected leaders through an Indians Nation 101 program similar to what Harvard University does for Congress
- Provide coaching and training to journalists and other communicators, like the Covering Native America training previously offered by the Native American Journalists Association
- Facilitate more face-to-face meetings and expand collaborative sessions like the NCAI pre-session into main conference programs
- Expand Native web presence, including development of a national informational site about Indian Country
- Facilitate more networking between tribal leaders and Native professional communicators
- Talk up good deeds, our own and those of our tribal neighbors, as part of regional and national outreach efforts





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