

American Indian Outreach

By Alex Ward

This is by no means a complete treatise on working in Indian Country. Much of this knowledge comes from working with individual Tribal organizations. Because there are 562 Tribes that are recognized in the United States – each experience will be different. You need to first leave your stereotypes at the door and work at treating the folks you work with as equals. If you are successful you can leverage your skills and resources with those of the Tribal partners and do a much better job than either of you could do alone.

American Indians are a group of people that is very misunderstood by others. Even what to call them is not understood. I attended a tourist seminar provided by a Blackfeet Indian named Curly Bear. He opened with: “You all are Native Americans – I’m an American Indian. Do you want to know why I’m an American Indian? It’s because Columbus was looking for India. I’m sure glad he wasn’t looking for the Virgin Islands.” Because Tribes are all different, they are also different in what they call themselves. If you want to be correct, ask them what they wish to be called. In the Plains it is most correct to call them by the name of their Tribe – Blackfeet, Crow, Northern Cheyenne, etc. or by the term American Indian. Other Tribes may prefer Native American or Alaska Native. So, ask them.

When a non-Indian group decides to provide services to Indian reservations, there are several things that should be done before moving ahead. First and foremost, getting to know some people on the reservation on which you wish to focus is the best start. Below is the typical approach that is usually used and some reasons why an alternate approach might be better.

Non-Tribal encroachment on reservations

If a person takes into account the bad track record “non-Indian organizations” have on reservations, one would be hard pressed to not understand why Tribes are reluctant to embrace the next organization heading on without having paved the way by showing that they see the Tribal organizations as “true” partners. In

Montana even the state hasn't learned and often comes to the Tribes with grant money they got for the state, but without talking with the Tribes before the grant application, they end up with a grant that is designed in such a way that the delivery won't work on the reservation. The correct way to do this is to work with the Tribal organization BEFORE applying for grants. The other thing that is important is for people who wish to work on reservations to realize that once they cross the border onto a reservation that they are no longer THE EXPERT on the outreach they wish to do. If this is done and the Tribal partner is involved in preparing the application for the grant (even gets some of the money), the outside partner will more than likely be embraced by the Tribe. If you read the history of Euro-Indian relations in the United States you will find that the Indians were the ones who welcomed the outsiders and the outsiders were the ones who took advantage of that good will.

Another thing to consider is that it is important to learn a little of the background and culture of the Tribe. One thing that often leads to misunderstandings with Indian people is that non-Indians often look people in the eye and assume that if a person won't look you in the eye they are being dishonest or, if in a classroom setting, not paying attention. In reality, they may be from an Indian culture that believes it's rude to look people in the eye. In many Plains Tribes it is rude to not accept food that is offered. I learned that early on and have on occasion accepted food that I didn't really want because I knew I would offend the person if I didn't take it. Some words are offensive – the word “Squaw” is derogatory and should never be used. I was on a conference call once planning an event and one of my counterparts from WA DC asked if we should take “Indian Time” into account and start the programs later. That was extremely offensive and I talked with the person later – especially when one of my partners told me how incensed others on the call had become when the term was used. Sometimes – as with the concept of “Indian Time”, it's OK for someone who has worked with the Tribe for a long time to allude to the term – my rule is not to speak to it unless it's brought up by another Tribal member. In some respects my time in the military and policing has prepared me for this as there are terms that the military and police use in discussing themselves that are not ok for outsiders to use.

Another mistake people not familiar with Indian Country make is to assume that Indians are all the same, no matter which Tribe they are part of. In reality, there

are 562 distinct and federally recognized Indian Tribes in the United States. Each Tribe has a different history and often very different culture. A good example of how organizations show their ignorance in this area is in the production of materials to be used in Indian country. Some put great information together and fill the white space with photos of Indians – anyone will do. We see pamphlets being distributed to Plains tribes with Navajo or Pacific Coastal likenesses. These are very recognizable to the Tribes where the material is being distributed. Also, many Indian meetings begin and end with a prayer from a Tribal elder and it is customary to present a gift to the elder for his participation. Many Tribes' culture dictates gifts of tobacco or sage or sweet grass to Tribal elders you visit, especially if you are asking them to do something. Again, it is important to find out what the specific Tribe expects.

How is one to learn all this? Get to know your partners socially so you feel comfortable asking for their input on the things you are doing. I was given an Indian Name by Chief Earl Old Person of the Blackfeet Tribe. This single event was an extreme learning experience for me. The name was a very small part of the ceremony – but a very great honor – I was actually being adopted into the Blackfeet Tribe. The name was given – he then presented me with the Eagle Feather he used in the ceremony. Since this was done at the Blackfeet Powwow there was an honor song and I danced (not well) around the arbor with many of the people who had been instrumental in me getting the name. Then there was a giveaway that I took part in and many items were given to people who I thought were important to me in my days on the reservation. Finally, there was a feast that was hosted by Eagle Shield Senior Center and about 100 people were fed. Indian people are a giving people. They see everything much different than we do. Poverty is something that isn't seen the same. Even the poorest Indian people share what they have with their family and friends. We also have to remember that we tried to take all that away from Indian people in over 200 years of residential schools. The thing that is amazing is that we were not successful and they are still a giving people. As I said before, your Tribal partners are the expert and without their help you may stumble through your grant, but you won't be nearly as successful as you would with their input.

Also, many organizations have so many things going on that they can only focus on one area for a short time. This approach is deadly in Indian Country because

that has been their history with off-reservation organizations. They come in strong and hard for a year or two and then leave with the Tribal partner holding the bag on a program that they might not be able to carry on, especially at the level they were when the organization and grant money were present. Obviously then, organizations need to be committed to the long haul when working with Tribes. It takes time to develop the relationships needed to be successful. Indian Tribes are more than used to people who are going to fix their problems. They are a proud race and more than competent to solve their own problems. They are often just way short of the resources and sometimes the experience or training to do so.

Successful casinos are often pointed to by non-Indians as the solution to Indian problems and a reason not to support their initiatives. Most successful casinos are in urban areas where there are large numbers of people to gamble and make money for the Tribe. The more successful ones have convention centers and hotels with them. Often they are also in states where casino gambling is only allowed on reservations or where the types of games are different in the Indian casinos than those off the reservations. On other reservations where there are casinos, there is little to draw non-Indians to the casinos and so they just rearrange the money that is already on the reservation rather than bringing in additional money for the Tribe to use to improve its situation in the area. In truth there is a bit of conflict on reservations as to whether casinos are the right solution to their funding problems. Many Indian people don't support using casinos to make money for the Tribe. Indian Tribes that do have successful casinos often do things like enrolling all their people 65 or over in Medicare or use the money to support other needs in the community. Again, all Tribes are different and Tribal councils are as different as governments in our own communities.

Healthcare and Indian Country

Healthcare is a sore point for American Indians. (A good primer for this is "Broken Promises" which is a U S Civil Rights Commission Study of Healthcare on Indian Reservations that was released in 2004.) Their primary health system is Indian Health Service which is grossly underfunded (about 55% of need in the Billings Area). Indian Health Service has a policy of not requiring those 65 or over who would have to pay premiums to enroll in Medicare. This is most likely

because there are two very different views of healthcare on reservations by Indians who can be considered “traditional” and those who are more “progressive”.

Traditional Indians feel that the US has treaty obligations to provide health care to all Indians and that that obligation is found in Indian Health Service. They are truly concerned with the efforts to get Indian people enrolled in other insurance as an effort to further erode the underfunded system and a way to eventually get rid of IHS in favor of more costly private insurance, including Medicare. Many traditionals are Tribal health directors or have power on Tribal councils which makes those Tribes reluctant to enroll their members in private insurance. One other issue around Medicare is that many traditionals have not enrolled and are old enough that their premiums are cost prohibitive because of the penalty for enrolling too late. This is reversible for those who are QMB eligible, but not for others. I have actually encouraged the Senate Finance Committee Chair to have the new health care reform to exclude Indians from the penalties (or say that IHS is creditable coverage as is done in Medicare D – but the staffer I talked to indicated that it isn’t creditable coverage – which seems to me to be a good reason to improve it). Unfortunately it’s an issue that should be corrected but the Indian Health Care Improvement Act hasn’t been passed for over 10 years.

On the other hand, many progressives would like to see all eligible Tribal members enrolled in Medicare to help take the pressure off the limited Contract Health funds IHS has to deal with people who have issues that need off reservation medical attention. I am working in Browning, MT and other places with IHS staff who are charged with enrolling qualified Tribal members in benefits such as Medicare Savings. Some traditional understand that they need to work on getting people enrolled to increase their quality of life in the short term – until the government actually faces it’s responsibility.

Summary

Working with American Indians is a very interesting and rewarding experience. I have become not only friends with my Indian partners, but they have become family. That is the greatest reward that can be bestowed on a person who is not connected to the reservation. American Indians have a great sense of humor and events I’ve been involved in on reservations in Montana have been some of the

most fun I've ever been involved with. They are also a most giving of people and are more than competent at what they do.

There are many stereotypes we have to deal with from our own backgrounds. I for one was raised in a border town where "border town racism" against Indians was alive and well. It's always easy to see people who meet our stereotypes if they stand out because they are members of another race that stands out. It's not as easy, unless we try, to see the people who are college graduates (in Browning often with degrees from schools like Harvard) who have decided they want to use their education to help their people or the people with high school or less education who are doing things that people with PhD's aren't accomplishing outside of Indian Country. In the process, don't forget that people are people and there are all types in all cultures. Curiosity, dedication and a true determination to work with Tribal organizations to accomplish great things is all that is needed along with the decision to treat the Tribal members as equals and forget forever the concept of "manifest destiny". And don't forget, much of the reason our First People are in the predicament they are in is that they weren't granted citizenship in their land until the 1920's and had no standing in court until well after that.