

Educating Your Audiences Establishes Identity

By Liz Pratt

Often times we find that establishing an organization's niche and brand are as essential to public relations as any other tool in the trade; however, there are situations when an organization must overcome being forced into an "assumed" niche to develop individuality. As the spokesperson for a sovereign tribal nation, I've learned educating the tribe's audiences has been one of the most critical aspects to establish its unique identity. There is only one Cocopah Indian Tribe in the world.

An organization can develop its logo, tag line and mission statement, but do these elements alone encompass an organization's complete identity? In my position, the answer is no. These elements help develop a skeletal perception, but an identity is defined when the organization breaks down generalizations and misconceptions and provides well-thought, meaningful explanations.

The Cocopah Reservation is located in the rural Yuma Valley along the Colorado River; it borders the U.S., Mexico, Arizona and California. For centuries, the Cocopah (Kwapa) — also known as the River People — have lived along the lower Colorado River and delta. The Cocopah people, described as generous and non-materialistic, have maintained their traditional and cultural beliefs through the various political environments and the ever-changing landscapes.

In the three years since the public relations department was created, I learned there were many misconceptions and presumed generalizations about the Cocopah people that needed to be addressed.

The tribe has had to respond to many issues including tribal gaming, immigration, multi-jurisdictional incidents, impacts on Native Americans by national trends, academic and health-related studies, and incidents occurring on other reservations.

Each response is an opportunity for the tribe to educate its audiences. For example, factors about the tribe that may not always be considered include: the tribe's unique history and culture; its unique location bordering the U.S., Mexico, Arizona and California in the rural Yuma Valley; that the reservation comprises three non-contiguous bodies of land and the population size. These are just a few examples. But these examples are important because these and others make each perspective unique to the Cocopah people.

I've learned through experience how important educating your audiences and the various media you encounter can be to establishing the organization's identity and to setting the organization apart. I've learned the following lessons that I felt were worth sharing:

- **Break Down Barriers** - Informational barriers can sometimes reinforce misunderstandings and misconceptions. An organization's stance needs to come from its source, rather than allowing generalizations or third-party resources to speak for you. If there are questions that cannot be answered because they may be culturally or historically sensitive for example, explain this to reporters. Explaining why information cannot be shared and then offering alternative suggestions will make you more truthful and transparent.
- **Enhance Individuality** - It is easy for an organization to fall prey to broad industry generalizations. There is no other Cocopah Reservation in the world. There is only one Cocopah people, culture and history. While the tribe may face similar trends and issues as other Native American tribes in this country, it is important to emphasize the tribe's individuality and unique perspectives.
- **Improve Communication** - Providing various information forums such as Web sites, media interviews, press releases and collateral material will not only help educate your audiences, but it will also help to improve your communication flow. You are providing dialogue with your audiences



and allowing them opportunities to learn about the organization. Doing so allows your audiences to develop thoughtful conclusions based on fact, rather than assumption.

- **Enable Information Control** - Educating your audiences and creating a communication flow also enables information control. In my experience, there is information made available to the public, and there is also information held sacred by the tribe that is not spoken outside of the tribal membership. Establishing a communication flow enables an organization to pre-determine the information that may be shared and the information that is safeguarded.

Liz Pratt is the Director of Communications for the Cocopah Indian Tribe and its businesses. She is also a member of the Southern Arizona Chapter of the Public Relations Society of America.