

TRIBAL PROGRAM NEWS

Working with Tribal Casinos

by Lisa Norton, Business Information Counselor

I recently attended a conference sponsored by ONABEN (Oregon Native American Business and Entrepreneurial Network) called "Trading at the River." This was an opportunity for Native business owners, tribes, and other entities interested in working with Native businesses to come together.

There were many sessions, but the one I found particularly useful was called "How To Do Business With Tribes." It featured a panel of speakers in key positions throughout tribes and gave each of them time to explain what they look for when doing business with Native-owned businesses.

One of the speakers was Gary E. George, chief operating officer, for the Wildhorse Resort & Casino. He provided a comprehensive list of things he looks for when working with Native-owned businesses. This was such a great presentation that I thought I would

share it with tribal members. Many have questioned me on how they could start working with tribal casinos and this information gives all of us something to think about.

- Be competitive – Don't just assume that because you're a tribal member, you don't have to compete with other non-tribal entities.
- Quality service – Again, don't just assume that because you're a tribal member, that we shouldn't expect quality service.
- Know your business – This means that you know what services you can provide to us.
- Be professional – Casinos are a business and we expect professional service.
- Commit only to what you are capable of – Don't commit to something you can't do just to do business with us.

- Don't put all of your eggs in one basket – Branch out to other companies and don't depend on just the casino's business to make your business succeed.
- Work with non-Indian entities – Diversify your client base so you have more options.
- Establish credibility – Maybe that means starting small to establish yourself with us and then gradually building a relationship.
- Contact the appropriate agencies – Take the time to research and know who you need to talk to before you come into the casino to do business.
- Be prepared to work the licensing process – Sometimes this is cumbersome, but we're required by law to follow this process, so you must be prepared to do this as well.
- Abide by your agreement – Deliver on what we agree to in order to do business with us.

- State you are Indian-owned, but don't overemphasize it – This is important, but it isn't everything.
- Sell your business – Be prepared to market your business and yourself so that you are attractive to us, your potential clients.
- Be patient – You may not get the contract every time, but if you're persistent, something will come along.
- Don't front for other organizations – Many companies try to do business with casinos and try to use tribal member-owned businesses as an easy way to get their foot in the door. Don't fall for that because it may backfire on you.

If you're interested in starting a business, currently own a business, or just have questions, please contact me. I usually work Mondays, Tuesdays, and Wednesdays from 8:15 a.m. to 3 p.m.

More Tips from Gary E. George

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At the Wildhorse Resort & Casino (WRC), we have a casino, hotel, golf course, RV park, and a museum. We have a budget of approximately \$47 million. Last year, the WRC spent approximately:

- \$1 million – goods, arts, and crafts (bought from local artists and sold to public)
- \$3 million – office goods and services
- \$500,000 – consultants and contractors

As an entrepreneur, you have to be **competitive** and offer an **economical price, location, service** (before, during, after), and provide a **quality product/work**.

What You Should Focus On

- ♦ Study, learn, and know your business and your competitors. Be professional. Know your customers or what you propose to sell.
- ♦ Commit to only what you're capable of doing well. Do not over-commit.
- ♦ Do not focus all your energy on tribes as your only customer. Branch out and work with non-Indian entities. Establish credibility – be willing to take on smaller projects.
- ♦ Contact appropriate tribal, state, and federal agencies and register as a certified minority-owned business. Obtain SBA minority designations or other state/local/tribal business certification, a gaming license if you want to work with tribal casinos, and a business registration form.

Tribal Expectations

We expect that you will:

- ♦ Abide by any agreements or contracts, and make sure that you can deliver what you agreed to.

- ♦ Recognize areas where your business is weak and be willing to get help to improve.
- ♦ State Indian ownership as a fact.
- ♦ Sell your business by emphasizing experience and success.
- ♦ Be patient. A rejected bid or opportunity is not the end of the world. Improve your position by asking why your bid was rejected, make improvements, and be ready to submit your next bid, which may be just around the corner.
- ♦ Be a certified Indian-owned business. Represent who you really are – don't be a front! Be prepared to do approximately 80 percent of the work. In some cases, this is a requirement.

Pitfalls

- ♦ Because you're an Indian-owned business, don't expect special treatment just because we're a tribe. Approach a tribe as you would any other opportunity by selling your business and what you can do for us.
- ♦ Know tribal laws. If a contract or agreement is breached, know where to get it resolved and in what legal forum. Tribes are sovereigns and if they didn't consent to suit, you could be tied up in a legal system. You may want a simple form of arbitration – it's cheaper and faster.
- ♦ Don't expect any special treatment because we're a sovereign. Become certified as a business.
- ♦ Make sure you have enough cash or capital to carry the business for 60 days. Learn how the tribe will process the payment of your invoice.*

*Suggestion from another panel member, but very important!

**Success doesn't come to any business.
You have to go out and get it!**