



Developing tribal casino employees as conduits for tribal government messaging



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ABSTRACT

Since the passage of the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act (IGRA) in 1988, tribal government gaming has become the most successful economic development strategy across Indian Country in the United States, with no other viable alternatives on the horizon. Being a highly regulated industry, tribal government gaming, like the legal gambling industry in general, takes place at the grace of legislation that reflects public opinion and commands public policy support. As such, tribal governments invest significant resources to manage public perceptions of their communities, their gaming rights, and their political status. Tribal gaming facilities on tribal lands, and more specifically tribal gaming customer–contact employees, represent a key interface between the general public and American Indian tribal communities. This paper presents research findings that explore the nature and source of knowledge by tribal gaming customer–contact employees in four tribally-owned casinos in California with a view to understand the role of tribal casino customer–contact employees as information conduits, and makes recommendations concerning how employees may be better leveraged to transmit carefully constructed tribal government messaging to the wider population. In particular, this paper highlights the gap between the legal and political status of the tribal government owners of tribal gaming facilities and the (often incorrect) perceptions of tribal communities that are often communicated by customer-facing employees to tribal casino guests.

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1. Introduction to the political dynamics of the tribal gaming industry

The Indian Gaming Regulatory Act (IGRA) outlines the three principle goals of Federal Indian policy: to promote tribal economic development, tribal self-sufficiency, and strong tribal government ([Indian Gaming Regulatory Act of, 1988](#)). Since its passage, tribal government gaming has become the most successful economic development strategy across Indian Country with no other viable alternatives on the horizon ([National Gambling Impact Study Commission, 1999](#)). According to the [National Gambling Impact Study Commission \(1999\)](#) employment created by tribal government gaming is one of its most important policy successes:

“Indian gambling provides jobs for Indian tribal members in areas where unemployment has often exceeded 50 percent of the adult age population. Many of the casinos also employ non-Indian people and therefore can have a significant positive economic impact on surrounding communities, as well as for many small businesses near Indian reservations ([NGISC, 1999, Chapter 6, p.15](#)).”

Nonetheless, tribal government gaming, like the legal gambling industry in general, is a highly regulated industry that takes place at the grace of legislation, reflecting public opinion and commanding public policy support ([Spilde & Taylor, 2013](#)). While legal gambling in general, and tribal gaming in particular, is expanding locally and globally as a means of economic development, tribal governments must continue to cultivate on-going public support for tribal gaming ([Spilde, 2003](#)). As such, tribal governments are aware of, and make attempts to manage, public perceptions of their communities, their gaming rights, and their political status. Ultimately, managing the public perception of tribal sovereignty, tribal identity, and the uses of tribal gaming revenues is a critical business and marketing practice for all tribal businesses, including gaming. To manage this public perception, tribal gaming facilities on tribal lands, and more specifically tribal gaming customer–contact employees, may represent a key interface between the general public and American Indian tribal communities.

While tribal gaming customer–contact employees are often approached by casino guests for general gambling information (e.g. the location of a particular electronic gaming device on the casino floor), these employees also play a critical role in relaying information about compulsive consumption of gambling products and services, as well as answering questions about the tribal government owners ([Spilde, 2010](#)). However, to date, little is known about the employees' tribal cultural or government knowledge and perceptions of tribal gaming, specifically how their knowledge and perceptions are formed, and how (or if) these perceptions are communicated well or accurately to tribal casino customers. This paper presents research findings that

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explore exactly these issues with tribal gaming customer–contact employees in four tribal-owned casinos in California with a view to understanding the role of tribal gaming customer–contact employees as information conduits. This paper also makes recommendations concerning how employees may be better leveraged to transmit carefully constructed tribal messaging to the wider population. In particular, the research findings highlight a gap between the legal and political status of the tribal government owners of tribal gaming facilities and the (often incorrect) perceptions of tribal communities that are routinely communicated to tribal casino customers. While this paper puts the focus on employee knowledge about tribal communities and tribal employers, the methods and findings related to sources of knowledge, and the utilization of casino employees as information conduits are directly applicable to sharing information with casino patrons on any important topic, including detailed information about compulsive consumption of gambling products and services.

2. Economic development through tribal government gaming

With the passage of the IGRA in 1988, the United States, including California, witnessed a rapid increase in the number of tribal government-owned gaming operations in the early 1990s (National Indian Gaming Commission, 2013). According to the National Indian Gaming Commission (2014), as of 2014, more than 228 tribal governments operate more than 440 tribal gaming facilities in the United States and 64 of these are in California (NIGC, 2014). In 2013, the NIGC records that approximately \$28 billion in gross gaming revenue was generated by tribal gaming representing over 70% revenue growth over the last decade. This growth in tribal government gaming has had significant social and economic benefits for tribal communities and the areas surrounding tribal lands since gaming revenues are directly invested back into local communities (Akee, Spilde, & Taylor, 2014).

Recent American Indian history has seen tribal gaming trigger more public interest and policy debate than any other tribal-related issue in the United States (Light & Rand, 2005). The complex and sensitive notion of tribal sovereignty lies at the heart of most tribal gaming related controversies such as tribe-state relations on taxation and revenue sharing, reservations for newly recognized tribes, regulation, and tribal gaming on lands acquired by a tribe after IGRA (HPAIED, 2008). Due to federally-recognized tribes' pre-constitutional status as sovereign governments, certain "distinctive rights" are enjoyed by tribal communities that are not shared by the larger American population (Steinman, 2006, p. 306). Expression of these "distinct rights" has led to significant positive economic, social, and political impacts in surrounding communities (cf. Janisch, 2006; Johnson, Filla, & McLaughlin, 2005; The Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development, 2008) generally in rural or isolated settings—often Indian reservations. Thus, tribally-owned casinos create employment opportunities in otherwise economically-depressed regions.

The impressive growth of the tribal gaming industry has brought jobs to Indian Country across the United States. As a result, two decades of data from the United States Census reveal that unemployment rates across Indian Country have declined from 24.2% in 1990 to 19.9% in 2010 (Akee et al., 2014, p. 45). In the state of California alone, tribal governments employ approximately 58,800 people and provide a much-needed economic hub for a number of rural and economically-depressed areas (State of California, 2015). Prior to tribal gaming, the lack of jobs across most of Indian Country resulted in very little direct interaction between non-Indians and tribal governments, particularly in the context of on-reservation employment.

3. Perception management is vital

Despite the already evident and potential future economic benefits that tribally-owned casinos do and can bring to surrounding communities, an undercurrent of uncertainty remains should public opinion

concerning the status and perception of American Indian nations as sovereign governments shift (Steinman, 2006). This uncertainty raises fundamental issues for tribal governments beyond gaming's direct profits and gains including social change, cultural production, group identification/identity, tradition and modernity, political economy, and nationalism. Exploring and understanding the perceptions non-Indian communities have towards owners of tribally-owned casinos are imperative as the history of changing federal Indian policies mirrors the changing attitudes of non-Indian communities (Steinman, 2006). A perception shift that positioned tribal governments as rights holders rather than political entities (i.e. sovereign nations) could lead to tribes being viewed as minorities and their "rights [to operate tribal gaming] may be reinterpreted by the court to bring them into alignment with contemporary social and political realities, as courts commonly do when laws are viewed as anachronistic and superseded by new beliefs and laws (i.e., parents' rights regarding children, husbands' rights regarding wives, laws against interracial marriages, etc.)" (Steinman, 2006, pp. 307–308).

The media also shapes the public image of casino-owning tribes. For example, in 2002, *Time* magazine published a two-part article on tribal gaming that undermined tribal sovereignty by commenting that, "Washington perceived gaming on reservations as a cheap way to wean tribes from government handouts, encourage economic development and promote tribal self-sufficiency" (Barlett & Steele, 2002, p. 46). The article neglected to mention how and why treaty rights were formulated, instead categorizing tribes as ethnic minorities (Steinman, 2006). "An outdated and inappropriate mainstream stereotype persists which sees "Indians" in terms of images in which indigenous people are not "supposed" to engage in capitalistic business enterprises or thrive economically in contemporary modes..." (HPAIED, 2008, p. 154, original emphasis). Furthermore, casino gaming is controversial and struggles for broad social acceptance. Therefore it is critical that tribal governments have some influence and control over their public image and the conduits through which this image is forwarded (Spilde, 2000, 2003). Importantly, tribal governments themselves seek to understand how information about them is communicated to the public by casino employees, because "the window of opportunity for Indian gaming which came with the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act of (1988) could easily be reversed" (Carmichael, 2000, p. 610).

Many casino employees have direct contact with guests and may therefore significantly influence guests' experiences, and by extension the image of both the casino and its tribal government owners. Tribal casinos have the potential to act as venues where cultural understanding can be explored and the image and perception of tribal communities can be carefully constructed, managed, and deployed. Achieving this outcome requires exploration of the current perceptions tribal casino employees have of their employers, and how these perceptions were formed.

The research presented here explores the nature and origins of tribal casino employees' perceptions of their employers with a view to bridging the gap between these perceptions and a more historically and legally accurate tribal government image rooted in tribal sovereign rights. Given the maturity of the tribal gaming industry, exploring how to establish and support an image that allows tribal governments to better define and protect their own cultural, economic and political future is very timely.

4. Research approach

Due to a lack of existing research concerning tribal casino employees, this project employs an exploratory approach suited to qualitative inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) underpinned by an interpretivist paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, 2000, 2005; Schwandt, 1994, 2000, 2007). This approach assumes that unearthing the 'meanings' of human 'action' (how people participate and make sense of the world) is fundamentally a process of interpretation (Schwandt, 2007), and in

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