

# Your Story Is Your Brand: Part II

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Presented at the ITC Branding and Marketing Workshop

Seattle Airport Hilton Hotel, March 1-2, 2011

Good morning

How many of you heard my keynote speech at your annual symposium in Polson, Montana in 2007 – the speech in which I said it was time for the federal government to give back all the land they stole from you during our nation's westward migration.

You need to know that nothing has happened over the last four years to alter my opinion. In fact, I probably feel more strongly about it now than I did in 2007. Your tribes – as well as the West's federal forests – would be in a lot better shape if you held title to the land.

Next question: how many of you heard my speech at your annual symposium in Lewiston, Idaho in 2009 – the speech in which I said that your story – the story of how you manage your forests and rangelands – is your brand.

You need to know that since we last saw one another in Lewiston, nothing has happened to alter my opinion. In fact, if it is possible, I now feel more strongly about what I said in Lewiston than when I said it two years ago in Lewiston.

Let me tell you why.

More than a year before I spoke in Lewiston, I asked Gary Morishima if he thought ITC's directors might be interested in participating in a wide-ranging discussion of opportunities for branding and marketing tribal forestry and wood products.

It turned out that they were interested, which led to Gary inviting me to speak in Lewiston, and which, a year later, led him to ask me if I might be interested in participating in the branding and marketing survey that has you here today and tomorrow.

In the course of my subsequent research, I learned that a similar study was completed about 25 years

ago and that, for lack of additional funding, it went nowhere. What a shame. Where might tribal forestry and tribal sawmilling be today if something wonderful had come of the original study?

I have worn many hats over the 13 years that I've known you: cheerleader, champion and, occasionally, well-meaning critic; but no hat has been more important than that for which I am professionally trained: reporter. An old news editor for whom I worked in the 1960s once told me he thought I had one of the best noses for news he had ever seen.

It was as a reporter in pursuit of a great story that I accepted invitations to speak at your ITC symposiums in Polson and Lewiston, and is as a reporter that I come before you this morning.

I'll get into the meat of my report in a few moments, but first let me tell you a bit about the two people who are joining us this hour. They, too, bring you reports, though they are not reporters in the same sense that I am.

Rick Palmiter sells lumber for the Idaho Forest Group, the largest purchaser of logs in Idaho and a company of which I am very proud. Its roots are in the old Shearer Lumber Company and, later, Bennett Forest Industries, companies built by my old friend Dick Bennett, whose father, Guy, built a wooden box plant in his basement in Clarkston, Washington during the Second World War.

Rick is here today representing Dick's grandson, Scott Atkison, a brilliant young man who now runs IFG and who, at my request, joined our Branding and Marketing Team. Scott could not be here today because he is in Finland learning more about world-class sawmilling technologies. I met Rick when he was still with Idaho Veneer in Coeur d'Alene, longer ago than either he or I care to admit.

Julia Rickard is the daughter of my friend Wes Rickard, a forestry consulting icon here in the Pacific Northwest. Many of you know Wes because of the work he's done for many of ITC's member tribes, often as an expert witness in litigation. I met Julia at your Mescalero symposium last spring. In real life, she is sales and marketing director for an Oregon winery, but she volunteered to help me complete my part of the branding and marketing study, and as you will soon discover, she brings a quite unique perspective to our work.

The three of us will share 45 minutes equally, thus leaving 15 minutes for your questions and our answers. And since I have burned through at least a third of my 15 minutes, I need to get going.

I was involved in two of the five study components listed on Page 4. Jim Haas, Wade Zammit, Dennis Gray, Jr. and I were tasked with gauging market interest in tribal forest products; and I worked separately with Scott Atkison to evaluate alternatives and opportunities for marketing tribal forest products.

These two study components unexpectedly evolved into the Lowes opportunity which Gary Morishima and I will detail for you tomorrow.

Numerous take home messages burst from our work, and they all revolve around one big message that needs to be written in letters 10-feet tall, so no one can miss it. The message is this: the Indian forestry story – which is closely tied to tribal forest products story – is so poorly known across our nation, even in the lumber industry, that we had a terrible time finding people who felt they were qualified to complete the written survey we developed.

Save for the pages of *Evergreen Magazine*, which I publish, your story

rarely reaches lumber markets, to say nothing of America's consumers, who I suspect would buy your products – and *perhaps* pay a small premium for them - if they knew your fabulous story.

After I realized our written survey wasn't getting the responses we needed, Julia and I camped on our telephones for more than two months, talking with people we know in various segments of the forest products industry: saw mill owners, lumber wholesalers and retailers, association executives and a few old foresters I know – Wes Rickard among them - who seem to know a little bit about everything. Here are the take home messages:

Quality, price, service and reliability are the gold standards in globally competitive lumber markets, especially in the current economic malaise – an unforgiving time that is culling out the weakest and most unreliable suppliers of logs and lumber.

The marketplace is merciless, and is thus unwilling to cut tribes much slack for their inability to be more reliable suppliers of quality logs and lumber. Most I talked to know the current recession has hit tribes very hard, but it has hit them hard too – and they are still in the market, guarding their positions. Many of you have fallen off everyone's radar screen, though a few of you are still selling logs and making lumber, I presume because you want to hold your spot in the market.

Even among your most loyal, long-time customers, and here I speak of those who know your story, sympathize with your economic plight, and would love to do business with you again, there is a feeling you have become an unreliable participant in an industry where, once again, quality, price, service and reliability are the gold standards.

If tribes aren't visible in the market – no matter how poor the market is – they risk losing their places and will have great difficulty regaining lost market share. The cost will be enormous.

Although tribes have lost visibility in the marketplace, the fact that they have owned and managed their lands for eons [sustainability writ large] is an enormous asset and a story well worth telling. This is especially true at

a time when most industrial timberland ownerships change hands frequently and are managed for short term gain without much thought to the future, though I could caution you against comparing yourselves to other landowners. Better than you toot your own horn and let them toot theirs. You never know who may want to buy your logs or sell your lumber somewhere down the road.

Forest certification is becoming a necessary evil in the marketplace – a costly requirement imposed by major lumber retailers, like Lowes and Home Depot, who face constant scrutiny from "green" groups that monitor forest operations in North America. After lunch today, Vinnie Corrao will explain what he thinks you ought to do. I love his solution.

Lumber distributors that sell to the so-called "big boxes" [Lowes, Home Depot and 84 Lumber] have become increasingly sensitive to the need for chain of custody certificates Ivan referenced.

Mill owners who buy your logs and love their quality believe you would be better served by scrapping your antiquated mills and investing your scarce capital in tree improvement projects that would further increase the value of your timberland. Scott Atkison is solidly in this camp – and I assume that Rick Palmiter will explain why this is so, but the bottom line here is that the same people who are working in your outdated and inefficient mills could be doing the tree improvement work on your land that is needed to improve log quality and price.

Wade Zammit and Jim Haas, who have forgotten more than I can ever hope to know about buying and selling logs and lumber, want you to know there are no earthly substitutes for realistically-based strategic plans that are well executed day in a day out. I agree – and would only add that the tribal forestry story, powerful though it is, is no substitute for a well-defined and well-earned reputation for quality, price, service and reliability.

Those we interviewed seemed to intuitively grasp the idea that core environmental values held by Indians mean that they are managing their forests sustainably, but they also spoke of the need for tribes to tell the story in consumer and news media

markets where "green" themes play so well. I could not agree more.

Even if tribes decide not to pursue a branding and marketing strategy, it is essential that you find a way to fund a long term campaign designed to tell the Indian forestry story in as many consumer venues as possible.

Media markets are hungry for this unique and fascinating story. They are drawn to its mystique like moths to a flame.

I believe the vignette that Gary Morishima and I wrote, which is titled "Earth's Gifts, and appears on Page 25 of your program is the template that you should be using. I invite you to read it and consider its power. You can do this. We can teach you how.