

Warning: consider this before you do business with Aboriginal people

# Spear Communications

Understand. Be understood.

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Are you an entrepreneur or executive looking to do business with Aboriginal people in Canada?

Maybe you work in banking, construction, finance, resource extraction, insurance or consulting.

You know that First Nations, Inuit and Métis people are the fastest-growing demographic in Canada.

In fact, Aboriginal people are growing at four times the national average. That represents a market opportunity, and you don't want to miss out.

But there are some things that you should know if you want to be successful.

Ignore these, and you risk misunderstandings and failure in your efforts.

Take them seriously, and you'll be better equipped to build strong business relationships.

## 1. We don't think about business like you do

For us, creating opportunities in business, or in anything, is about improving life for the community. It may be our reserve, or our nation, or even Aboriginal people in Canada as a whole.

Why?

Because even the most successful Aboriginal entrepreneur today is, at most, two generations from impoverishment.

Most of us have trauma, violence, abuse, addiction and suicide in our family background. We've gone into our work wanting to make things better for ourselves and others.

I won't BS you. For some Aboriginal people, "giving back to the community" is nothing more than talk.

We're no different from anyone else when it comes to hypocrisy.

But you should understand the importance of having a broad perspective in business. Yes, the goal of Aboriginal businesses is to make a profit.

However, there's a goal beyond the goal: to heal our communities and make life better.

## 2. If we don't know you, we don't trust you

Sorry, but it's true. So you need to start by accepting it.

There's a long history of Aboriginal people being manipulated and exploited.

We've seen it all, and it's mostly been ugly for us.

Why should we trust you and your business pitch, when

we've been betrayed so many times before?

We're going to be watching your every move carefully.

You're going to have to work much harder than you're used to in business to earn our trust.

Now, I hear what you're saying: "I know about hard work!"

Yeah?

Good, because it may take years, even decades, to build the trust you need to do business. That's not the pace mainstream business is accustomed to.

But remember: it's about the long term. If your idea in business is to show up when it's time to do a deal, make a buck, and get out, take Aboriginal people off your list of prospects.

Seriously, do yourself a favour and forget about it.

It's not going to work that way.

### 3. We want a relationship

The good news is that you can earn our trust. It's not easy, but once you have it, we treat you like family.

We tell you stories, take you out on the land, teach you our ways, tell you the words for things in our language.

Aboriginal people care so much about trust because we are vulnerable. We don't have a lot of political or economic power. We're a minority in Canada.

But even if that weren't so, our cultures and stories and ceremonies are all about relationships. We've survived by understanding and showing respect to our connections—connections to our clan, to our nation, to our allies, to the land.

So if you want to do business with us, we expect to see you in the community and to get to know who you are.

### 4. We're angry

As you're getting to know Aboriginal people, you're going to hear a lot of angry words.

Be prepared for this whenever you are planning a

community meeting.

Don't take it personally. It's going to feel and sound like we're angry at you, but we're not.

At least, not if you are present and genuinely listening to us.

Give it time. Eventually, we'll finish saying what we have to say.

If you are still there at the end, listening, you'll have earned respect.

You'll have to do this many times, and there's getting around it.

### 5. We're all different from one another

The Métis are not the Inuit. The Inuit are not the First Nations. We Mohawks are not the Plains Cree. And the Plains Cree are not the Mushkegowuk Cree.



I don't have to tell you there's a lot to learn.

You get it. When it's your first time going into an Aboriginal community, you're terrified.

Relax.

You see, we don't expect you to be an expert on our cultures and protocols.

We expect you to listen and to show basic respect.

We'll tell you what you need to know. If you have a question, ask. No big deal. We love to tell people about ourselves.

And there are many different ways of doing things across Turtle Island.

## 6. Traditions and culture matter

Whether it's hunting, fishing, trapping or medicines, you have to take our priorities seriously. These things have sustained Aboriginal people forever, and we know that long after your company has left the community we will still be living on the land.

Get this one wrong, and it's deal breaker.

## 7. We don't agree on what we want

Don't expect clarity when you go into a community.

Maybe you'll get it, maybe you won't.

We're divided.

Whether it's money, business, finance, economics or land, we have irreconcilable differences.

Some of us, maybe most of us, don't even know what we want.

Or we want a bunch of things that don't quite add up.

The fact is you will get caught up in the internal disagreements of our communities.

And we don't always separate business and politics as thoroughly as you might like.

Things could get messy, frustrating and unpleasant. Welcome to our world!

If you try to speed the process up, or to shut down the discussion, expect your effort to blow up in your face.

Community consensus is the community's job, not your job.

It's too bad if you're in a hurry.

We are trying to come back from horrific losses, so respect our need for space and time.

We are grappling with nothing less than survival, so getting it right can be far more important to us than getting it done.

It would be great if we all spoke with one voice and one mind, but that's not the reality at present.

Again: be open, be patient, be honest, and build respectful, trust-based relationships.

Or don't, and watch your opportunities disappear before your eyes.



**- Wayne K. Spear is the Founder and President of Spear Communications. This article is part of his ongoing series called "Thought Bombs."**