

## Triumph: Brenda Parsons, Indigenous Entrepreneur

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Brenda Parsons  
*All Nations Print*

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### INTRODUCTION

Creating and sharing knowledge through paper is entrenched in society. Ever since the year 932, when Chinese printers adopted the first printing technology known as wood-block, entrepreneurs and like-minded individuals have arisen to fill the desired need in the printing market (American Printing History Association, n.d.). Print has evolved with humans through time, showcasing both the practical uses and the displays of greed, hatred, and pessimism. Within the last one hundred years, print media helped create the first brand and brand promotion campaign. Print media has also been the outlet for proliferation of false advertising claims, placing subliminal messages with ulterior motives, and promulgating chaos. It is evident in today's society that print media is a unique form of storytelling aimed to fulfill human needs. This work outlines the journey of an Indigenous entrepreneur who at

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I am in my last year of studies at the University of Manitoba's Asper School of Business, where I am pursuing a double major in Marketing and Entrepreneurship. Currently, I am the founder of two service-based businesses operating in Whiteshell Provincial Park, MB.

times faced great opposition from both market and societal restrictions but has moved to a story of triumph and success.

All Nations Print is a for-profit, Indigenous operated, and female owned business in Winnipeg that is focused on providing exceptional service to Indigenous communities across Manitoba and surrounding provinces. Research concentrating on Indigenous entrepreneurs often determines connections to cultural heritage and beliefs and business fundamentals. Brenda Parsons of All Nations Print brings a personal perspective that needs recognition and consideration.

## **CANADA'S PRINTING INDUSTRY AT A GLANCE**

The printing industry in Canada encompasses a wide range of services, from printing and publishing books, newspapers, and magazines, to creating labels and wrappers for food products. There are 5,841 printing businesses in Canada, which account for an overall revenue of \$9.2 billion (Leach, 2019). In order to shine in this market, successful printing businesses not only must adopt new technology, they also need to have marketing expertise, a highly skilled workforce, attractive product presentation, and the ability to fill demands of the local market through strong network connections.

Manitoba accounts for 2.5% of printers in Canada. Out of these printing companies, there is only one other business aside from Parsons, All Nations Print which focuses on serving the niche market of First Nations communities.

## **ALL NATIONS PRINT OVERVIEW**

All Nations Print (ANP) is a full service printing company that provides printed material, promotional products, and design work to Indigenous communities and organizations located primarily in Manitoba. The company was formed in 2002 by owner and operator, Brenda Parsons. She had two goals for her business when she started: she wanted to do \$1 million in sales, and wanted to move to an urban reserve to take advantage of a tax exemption. Parsons is still working towards accomplishing her goals.

Over the past 17 years in business, Parsons has grown the team at ANP to four full time employees and has reached annual revenues of \$750,000. Her business specializes in small to medium sized orders. Approximately 80% of her sales come from federally funded organizations, such as Child Family Services, Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs, and other Indigenous organizations and affiliates. This underserved niche market is accompanied by a unique flow of business processes which requires a steep learning process that takes years to navigate. This barrier to entry gives Parsons a competitive advantage. Parsons has invested her time, money, and spirit into this business, learning valuable life lessons and business practices along her journey. Parsons runs her business with a central profit motive, blended with support and emotional connection with her clients.

### **Founder's History**

Brenda Parsons is an Indigenous woman raised in Gimli, Manitoba. Growing up, Parsons's parents shielded her from racism based on her ethnicity. This personal history allowed her to live life without much hesitation well into her thirties. She had good credit, which is

demonstrated by having a history of multiple car loans and purchased her home. When she applied for jobs, she was hired based on her skills and knowledge (B. Parsons, personal communication, October 18, 2019). Before starting her business, she worked as a corporate sales representative with annual sales over \$1 million.

Parsons decided to start her business and relied on her business expertise to that point. She entered the business world with optimism but was faced with challenges intended to crush her ambition and threaten her business. Before starting ANP, Parsons networked with the owners of other printing companies in Winnipeg and formulated a comprehensive business plan.

### **Organizational Structure**

Parsons has worked in every position within her company. She is a fluid leader and provides the necessary support to her staff to excel. When ANP was formed, she worked 50 to 60 hours per week. The business has now matured, and she finds herself at work 30 to 35 hours a week. Parsons's role in the company is mostly administrative. She handles payroll, manages relationships with suppliers, sends out the invoices, and deals with debt collections.

Parsons's business model deviated sharply from her original business plan. She chose the Indigenous market based on perceived opportunities provided by the Indigenous Procurement Strategy, which was adopted on both a federal and provincial level and awards contracts to Indigenous-owned businesses for projects occurring on Indigenous land or with Indigenous organizations. To this day, Parsons has yet to receive a project from this program.

Nonetheless, the Indigenous market was underserved. What she did not anticipate was how underserved the market was and the level of services desired. It did not take long for ANP to expand their services and within a few years they began to meet all their customers' needs around advertising and promotion. Parsons hired a graphic designer to bring all design in-house. She began partnering with suppliers to deliver promotional products along with printed goods to their customers. Remote communities had unique challenges, including poor Internet connection, lack of technical support, and often unclear implementation procedures. These communities were stretched to the limit, so ANP's one-stop shop was enticing. This was a turning point for Parsons business, as she began to offer complete services and solutions for these communities. ANP became a full-service marketing company, which has helped her business operate competitively within the niche Indigenous market.

ANP's organizational structure was originally conceived to be staffed solely by Indigenous people. Shop jobs are entry level positions paying entry level wages. Her initial intention to only hire Indigenous employees started to affect her business and mental health. Employees were constantly lax in coming to work on time and had an assortment of life issues. She began working with Manitoba Institute of Training and Technology to help fill these positions on a more permanent basis focusing on people's capabilities rather than ethnicity (B. Parsons, personal communication, October 18, 2019).

## **ANALYSIS OF CHALLENGES AND SUPPORTS**

The definition of success is divergent among people. For some, success is determined by the number shown on the bottom line of the income statement. For certain Indigenous ventures,

“the day-to-day activities of the businesses are conducted with social objectives in mind. What are expenses to entrepreneurs (salaries, training and development, purchases of inputs, and so on) and something to be minimized, are seen by those developing businesses in these communities as opportunities to deliver socioeconomic benefits” (Anderson, Leo & Dana, 2006). This view can be generalized to all Indigenous ventures, creating a business stereotype. It is evident that “there is a growing need to understand more about Indigenous entrepreneurship and how it parallels and diverges from non-Indigenous entrepreneurship” (Lindsay, 2005). Parsons’s business practice is a perfect example of how her strategy closely parallels a non-Indigenous entrepreneur’s perspective as she embraces capitalism and financial freedom for herself.

Parsons has made it quite clear that she is in business to make money; however, she does not downplay the importance of giving back to her community, which can be referred to as compassionate capitalism (Sheffield, 2015). Her business continues to serve her well, and it gives her a platform to financially support charities and donate her time to the younger generation, where she shares her insights about ethics, culture, and business.

## CHALLENGES FACING ANP

One way in which society views a small business is by scrutinizing the owner. All Nations Print is owned by an Indigenous woman operating in an industry dominated by men (B. Parsons, personal communication, October 18, 2019). It is not surprising that the main challenge encountered by Parsons in the beginning was discrimination. Parsons had faced no racism her entire life, so she expected no less in her entrepreneurial business pursuit. Instead, she was bullied by angry outsiders, who would walk into her office unannounced and criticized her, saying, “You’re nothing but a liar and a thief” (B. Parsons, personal communication, October 18, 2019). When she applied for a loan from the bank where she had been a customer for 20 years, the bank manager said, “What did you think was going to happen to you when you opened an obviously Indigenous business” (B. Parsons, personal communication, October 18, 2019). She cried every day for the first year of her business. Parsons then took those trials and made them the impetus to fight back and show people that she was here to stay.

Within the first year of operation, she asked herself whether her business was really worth the fight. Her business pursuit followed a more mainstream capitalist approach, yet she still had to prove that her business could contribute to effective economic development. The fact that her business was Indigenous-owned and operated was enough for the business to be considered questionable. One of the main factors for creating opportunities and economic development is “that the institutions are seen as legitimate, and if they are not seen as legitimate, their ability to regulate and organize the development process will be undermined, and development will be blocked” (Wong & McMurdy, 2009). Entrepreneurship and business development are on the rise for Indigenous peoples, and changing the culture within Manitoba to promote Indigenous ventures is key to their success. Not everyone is as determined as Parsons was, and not everyone will be able to stand up to racism. Canadians need to encourage, and not undermine, Indigenous businesses. Parsons overcame a this hurdle, but fears many give up during this time, which leads to the large gap between non-Indigenous and Indigenous business success.

Another challenge that Parsons currently faces in her business is supporting Indigenous human capital. An important factor in hiring decisions goes beyond skills and attributes. This factor is whether or not the business owner can see herself successfully working with the potential hire. In the early years of ANP, Parsons focused on hiring urban-based Indigenous staff but faced the hard reality that “a comparison of urban Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations shows that Indigenous populations lag behind non-Indigenous populations on every measure and especially in terms of education” (Peters, 2009, p. 13). As a small business owner, Parsons focuses on hiring the most reliable and educated individuals she can.

## ALL NATIONS PRINT SUPPORTS

Parsons’s ability to separate economic and community-based views has been a huge support. Parsons has an entrepreneurial mindset that puts her business first. Her approach allows her to be “tough skinned enough to get through [her] rite of passage” (B. Parsons, personal communication, October 18, 2019). This is something that she fears holds back many Indigenous peoples and their business ideas.

Business owners in a competing market all recognize the capitalism that “emphasizes the importance of the individual at the expense of the collective” (Atleo, 2017). When Parsons is competing for business, she acknowledges that she is competing for market share. As Parsons says, “business is business” (B. Parsons, personal communication, October 18, 2019). She is able to understand her target market better than her competitors as she is well educated in her clients’ histories, business preferences, and community aspects.

She knows her market. Parsons spends a lot of time analyzing her culture and community. Her background and knowledge allow her success in a unique niche in the printing industry. It is an opportunity that competitors were either unable to realize or lacked adequate knowledge to serve. ANP is able to tailor their services to best suit their clients. When a client calls ANP, they talk with Parsons. When a client emails ANP, they get a response from Parsons. Parsons knows that sustainable Indigenous economic development relies heavily on values and forming relationships and partnerships. She has been able to effectively organize her business practice around this concept. Parsons has just as much to gain from the communities as they do from her. This is the concept of interdependence, and it is prevalent when dealing with Indigenous communities and allies (Wong & McMurdy, 2009).

## REFLECTION

After I completed the interview, I asked Parsons if there was anything specific she would like me to reflect on. She insisted that I write about my thoughts stemming from the interview as she is curious what she sounds like to a 22-year-old white male business student. Here are my thoughts.

The interview lasted one hour, but within that hour, a special entrepreneurial bond formed. As Parsons began to tell her story, the similarities between her and me started to add up in my head. Whether it was the discussion around financial freedom gained through self-employment, her definition of success, or the stories as a young entrepreneur, I was able to relate my own life experiences and beliefs with everything she was saying. Brenda is very

different from me, yet the connection that we had over business perspectives and hard work was the same. Not only is her story a testament to a unique Indigenous economic perspective, it is a story that should be heard by all entrepreneurs. My main takeaway from the interview would be that you need to be “tough skinned enough to get through your rite of passage.” Regardless of beliefs or community focus, we both agreed that starting a successful business is going to come at a cost to someone else or some other business. Very rarely is a new business taking off with a new idea, so starting an Indigenous printing business means that inevitably competitor market share shrinks. In any business there will be kickback, and it is important to note this; you must be strong, as there is no place for the emotional or the weak. Parsons’s story was inspiring, but more than that, her story made me realize something bigger. Despite where you grow up, the religion you follow, or the tribe you are a part of, an entrepreneurial mindset can be found in individuals anywhere, and it often reflects their community ties.

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