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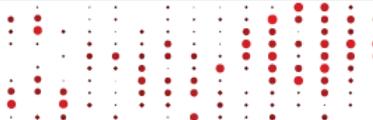
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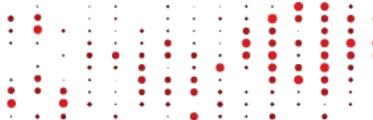
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# Extreme Local Impact

WHAT ONE PROFESSOR LEARNED—AND TAUGHT—AS HE MET WITH INUIT ENTREPRENEURS IN THE ARCTIC NORTH.

BY JASON LITTLE • JANUARY 22, 2019



After mentoring Inuit entrepreneurs by videoconference for 18 months, Franklin Pierce professor Jason Little gets a chance to meet with them in person. From left to right: Chris Idlaut, Michael Milton, Little, and Jamesie Itulu. (Photo by Jason Little)

Much of the current talk about business education focuses on conducting research with impact. In many cases, scholars envision their research having an effect on large cities, whole industries, or global problems such as climate change. But as professors, can we conduct research studies and participate in outreach activities that are just as valuable—and deeply impactful—when we target a particular corner of the world and a small, defined population?



The Hamlet of Pond Inlet on a Sunny Day. (Photo by Jason Little)

It was 2008 when I first visited Nunavut Territory in Canada's remote Arctic North. After a journey that included a 600-mile canoe trip on the Kazan River, I ended up at the hamlet of Baker Lake. I was soon captivated by the culture, works of art, local businesses, and buildings built on permafrost. Over the next ten years, in which I went on additional Arctic river expeditions, I considered how I could combine my love of Inuit culture with my work as a business marketing professor at Franklin Pierce University in Rindge, New Hampshire. I ultimately developed a sabbatical plan that allowed me to return to the region in 2018—to learn and to mentor.

## SETTING THE STAGE

Among my goals for my sabbatical trip was to act as a mentor for Inuit businesspeople. More than a year before my 2018 journey, I connected with a group of young entrepreneurs who met monthly at the library in Pond Inlet, a hamlet of approximately 1,500 Inuit. The entrepreneurs were interested in developing their small businesses, which sold products such as apparel, food service, and original works of art.

For 18 months, I conducted online video sessions with these entrepreneurs with the help of Aileen Hope, a local angel volunteer who works for the Nunavut Arctic College. We discussed sustainable business practices, mission statements, quality product design, website development, and inventory management. These issues take on special challenges in a location where ice conditions influence the ability to conduct business. I didn't use the video sessions to tell the local business owners what they needed to do; instead, I encouraged them to let me know what they wanted to learn and accomplish so they could apply new lessons to their businesses.

My other goal with the trip was to conduct marketing research among entrepreneurs in Nunavut. In the spring semester of 2018, before I departed on my journey, I worked with six undergraduates at my university to research online marketing communication practices used by the businesses in this remote region. The Franklin Pierce University Small Business Advisory Group (SBA) is a small student team whose charter is to help organizations and startup enterprises develop business

initiatives. Although the Inuit enterprises I was working with weren't exactly startups, the SBA students were eager to research business practices in a region that was three times the size of Texas but had only 40,000 inhabitants spread across 25 hamlets.

The SBA students researched all 343 registered Inuit companies, gathering information about each organization's online presence and marketing strategy. They noted how visible Inuit-owned businesses were in Google searches, how these businesses used websites and social media platforms, and how these businesses branded their offerings and delivered key marketing messages. To the best of my knowledge, this is the first research study related to business marketing communications in Nunavut Territory, and it forms part of my finished research.

The SBA team's findings suggested that 87 percent of Inuit-owned businesses showed up in a Google search, 39 percent had a website or homepage, and 19 percent had a Facebook page. But use of all other social media platforms was minimal, and only 8 percent of businesses used taglines or slogans. Many of the marketing messages that students observed were focused on themes such as economic development for the region and employment and training opportunities for the Inuit. These figures indicated that the Inuit businesses had ample room for growth.

## **CONDUCTING ON-SITE RESEARCH**

With this information as background, I made my trip back to the region in the summer of 2018, where I continued my mentoring and research activities.

As part of my research, I interviewed a dozen senior economic/business development officers, general managers, and executive directors of organizations that assist Nunavut businesses. Conducted in Nunavut's capital city of Iqaluit as well as Pond Inlet, the interviews focused on how business leaders perceived Nunavut market communications and how these communications could be improved.

I discovered that marketing communications messages used by Nunavut businesses primarily fell into five focus areas: quality service, customer service, community service, Arctic themes, and the Inuit life (employment/training, culture, and Inuit-owned business). I learned that that Facebook was the predominant communication strategy business owners used to reach both new and current customers. Interviewees also told me they had an overwhelming need for developing professional websites in order to reach new customers locally, across Canada, and elsewhere.

During these interviews, participants also identified other challenges. For instance, the Nunavut government recognizes four official languages—Inuktitut, Inuinnaqtun, English, and French. Many businesses advertise in all four languages, and translation errors are common. That situation might soon be improving, however, as in 2019 Facebook will be available in Inuktitut, which represents all the Inuit dialects spoken in Nunavut, including Inuktitut and Inuinnaqtun. Inuktitut speakers are now accessing the Facebook Translate app to offer proposed translations; community members can upvote or downvote translations to determine whether or not they become official.



Sirmilik National Park can be seen across Eclipse Sound. (Photo by Jason Little)

After I completed my interviews in Iqaluit, I traveled north on a small prop plane to get to Pond Inlet. This crown jewel of Nunavut overlooks the Eclipse Sound and the stunning mountains and glaciers of Sirmilik National Park. My Inuit mentees and some of their friends met me at the remote gravel runway to offer a warm welcome. After I had spent a few days in this small, close-knit community, even children began calling me by name as they encountered me on the streets.

During my time at Pond Inlet, I worked closely with one of my mentees, Jamesie Itulu, an artist who provides designs for High Arctic Apparel Company. During our sessions, we covered best practices in leadership, goal setting, business planning, budgeting, and accountability. Itulu is a member of the Pond Inlet Community Economic Development Committee, and he was able to draw on some of these new skills in his committee role. I also wrote a recommendation for him as he applied to Nunavut Sivuniksavut, a college in Ottawa that specializes in Inuit studies. Working one-on-one with an Inuit entrepreneur enabled me to see direct evidence of the impact I could have.

## **SHARING RESULTS**

When my trip was completed and I returned home, I wrote my report, “A Research Study to Determine Effective Marketing Communication Strategies for Businesses Located in Nunavut,” and shared it with all the participants. My goal for my findings and recommendations is to help Inuit business owners and entrepreneurs learn new strategies for growing their companies. Sylvie Renaud, regional director of Nunavut Operations, Canadian Northern Economic Development, told me that she intended to share the report with partners and stakeholders, as well as staff members, so they can help more entrepreneurs implement best practices in their marketing efforts.

I also want to share my research more widely, not simply discussing my findings, but also describing the outstanding cultural exchange I experienced. In April, I will present at our institution’s annual Academic Showcase. I hope to present my research at the Nunavut Trade Show, held each September in Iqaluit, and the biennial Northern Lights Conference in Ottawa.

In addition, as a university educator, I will share my Nunavut insights in my classroom, because I believe my experiences will give students a unique perspective on marketing and business challenges. For instance, we can discuss how distribution is affected by the environment. Because the icecap is melting, more cruise ships and more tourists are visiting the Nunavut hamlets, which brings both economic boon and environmental risks. At the same time, cost-effective sealift for the transportation of goods will become increasingly important.



The Pond Inlet Nattinak Visitor Center and Library is built on stilts due to permafrost conditions. (Photo by Jason Little)

My students and I also will look at the complex legal status of the Northwest Passages. Canada considers the passages to be part of its internal waters, while most maritime nations—including the U.S.—consider these to be international straits that are open to foreign vessels. I expect topics such as these to engage students in ways that more traditional marketing subjects do not.

Through these discussions, I want to help students understand the Inuit culture—the people, their creativity, and the artwork that springs from their connection to the Earth. I want them to develop empathy for a creative and interesting people, which could help them develop broader empathy for the customers they will be serving once they enter the workforce. And I want them to develop a better understanding of business marketing tactics and strategies by first seeing how these tactics are used by one specific group, and then considering how similar strategies might work in other situations.

As for myself, I view these research efforts as merely part of my lifelong fascination with the Inuit culture. My parents recently found a report I had done on the Eskimos when I was in first grade, and the discovery made me feel like I had come full circle. My goal is not to be disruptive of this fascinating culture, but to help the Inuit keep their identity as they take advantage of business strategies and opportunities that will benefit them and their people. If I can do that, I will feel that my engagement has led to some of the most valuable impact of my career.

Jason Little is a business marketing professor at Franklin Pierce University in Rindge, New Hampshire. For more information, visit [The Nunavut Project](#).