

U.S. Department of the Interior  
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Office of Indian Energy and Economic Development  
Division of Economic Development

Tribal Economic Development Principles-at-a-Glance Series  
Marketing Strategies for Native American Artists  
and Artisans

**Tribal Economic Development Principles-at-a-Glance Series**

# **Marketing Strategies for Native American Artists and Artisans**



## Tribal Economic Development Principles-at-a-Glance Series

### **Marketing Strategies for Native American Artists and Artisans**

*This is the 19th in a series of economic development primers produced by the Division of Economic Development (DED), Indian Affairs Office of Indian Energy and Economic Development (IEED), to offer answers to fundamental questions about creating jobs and expanding economies in tribal communities.*

*If you would like to discuss in more detail ways to market a small American Indian or Alaska Native business, please contact the DED at (202) 219-0740.*

#### **What is “marketing”?**

“Marketing” is the strategy used to attract customers to a product.

#### **What are the “Four P’s of Marketing” and why are they important?**

Oftentimes, business strategists will refer to the “Four P’s of Marketing” as Product, Place, Price and Promotion.<sup>1</sup> Focusing on the “Four P’s” can help a Native American artist or artisan start and sustain his or her business.

*What you should ask yourself about your “Product”.*

- What are you selling?
- If you are selling beadwork for instance, what makes your beadwork better than the next person’s beadwork?
- What is special about your beadwork?



Northern Shoshone woman’s leggings and moccasins, ca. 1910. (12/3197, 12/3213)

<sup>1</sup> All images in this document are from the National Museum of the American Indian Website <https://americanindian.si.edu/explore/exhibitions/washington/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/m/marketing.asp>

- Are there specific items that you produce that would be more likely to sell as a pair?

For instance, a full set of regalia (i.e., dress, breast plate, hair ties, concho belt, awl case, knife case, belt pouch, leggings, and moccasins) might sell at a higher rate and for more money than selling each item individually because they come as a complete ensemble with color coordination in mind.

*What you should ask yourself about “Place”.*

- Where do you plan to sell your product?
- Do you have a brick and mortar store?
- Do you have a website?
- Do you plan to sell your product at events such as powwows or art markets?

Your marketing approach will vary depending on where you intend to sell your product.

*What you should ask yourself about “Price”.*

When determining price important questions to ask yourself include the following:

- How much do the materials cost to make each individual product?
- How much time does it take to make the product?
- How much is one hour of your time worth?
- At what level of quality is the product made at, both in terms of quality of materials and quality of craftsmanship?  
(For ideas on how to determine this, consult the section on *Determining Product Quality* towards the end of this document.)

After answering all of these questions, you should be able to determine the price at which you will sell your product to ensure it is worth your time to create the product and that you are turning a profit on each product you sell.



**Shoulder bag/bandolier bag  
(probably Oklahoma Delaware).  
(21/3358)**

*What you should ask yourself about “Promotion”.*

- What types of promotional activities (e.g., online, radio or television advertisement) are needed to sell your product?
- In addition to having a vendor booth at a powwow or other event, do you also plan to have employees walk around with products and try to make individual sales?
- Do you plan to run specials during major purchasing holidays such as Christmas or Mother’s Day, for instance?
- Do you plan to raffle or donate products to increase exposure of your business?

### **What is “branding” and why is it important?**

Branding is an important component of your marketing strategy. The first question you might be asking yourself is: What exactly *is* branding? Branding is what defines your business and lets customers know the level of quality they can associate with your product. It includes your brand name, logo, and a catch phrase. For example, think of the brand name, “Nike”. Whenever you see Nike's logo (the Nike swoosh sign) you automatically associate it as a Nike product and expect high quality sports gear. Nike also has a catch-phrase, "Just do it", which resonates with customers.

Using Nike's example, start brainstorming some ideas for your company's brand name, logo, and catch phrase! Then consider trademarking them.

### **What strategies can I use to attract potential customers’ attention?**

Creating a mission statement explaining what a customer’s purchase will help support can have a positive effect on your business’s sales. For example, you can write something along the lines of, “[Insert business name] is a small family owned business focused on preserving traditional Lakota arts and crafts, in addition to sharing our rich Lakota culture with people near and far. By

purchasing a product from my business you are supporting Native American economic development and prosperity for future Lakota generations to come." Sales can increase when customers know their purchase is making a positive social impact for an individual or community.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, attaching a story to your product can yield a higher potential selling price. Customers are more likely to purchase an item after hearing or reading a story about it<sup>4</sup>. For instance, is there a story behind the symbol or handwork, such as a particular type of stitch, used to create the item? What was the artist thinking or feeling when creating the artwork piece? Convey to the customer the importance and significance of the product you are selling.

You might also think about how you can attract customers to your physical store location. Consult with your state's tourism office by either viewing its website, or by e-mailing or calling, to determine if there are any tours suggested for visitors and whether your business can be listed as a stop on the agenda. To attract tourists to your shop, you can host open studio days where they can witness an artist at work creating a painting or particular craft and giving them the option to purchase that product or others in the store following the demonstration.



**Lakota model baby carrier with porcupine-quill embroidery, North or South Dakota, ca. 1880. Photo by Walter Larrimore, NMAI. (12/2308)**



**Burden basket/pack basket (probably Gitlaktamix Nisga'a). (01/4280)**

<sup>3</sup> Mahoney, Dillon. "Changing Strategies in Marketing Kenya's Tourist Art: From Ethnic Brands to Fair Trade Labels." *African Studies Review* 55.1 (2012): 161-90. Web.

<sup>4</sup> Belk, R. W., and R. Groves. "Marketing and the Multiple Meanings of Australian Aboriginal Art." *Journal of Macromarketing* 19.1 (1999): 20-33. Web. 26 Sept. 2014.

### **Should I set up a website?**

The internet is a low-cost way to reach a wide customer base around the world. Creating a web presence will allow you to feature your products. There are many online payment mechanisms that can be embedded in your website to allow visitors across the globe to become instant customers. Your website can include your brand, mission statement, artist biographies, and multimedia. You may also consider posting a video of yourself to provide a human connection, which can make customers more likely to purchase your product. Try creating a video of yourself explaining how to create a particular stitch or technique that potential customers might be interested in learning.

If you are selling paintings or drawings, you will want to make sure online images of your items are low-resolution and thumbnail-sized images to avoid them becoming targets of unauthorized downloading and printing. To make up for a low-resolution photograph, you can include a written description of the item next to the image.<sup>5</sup>

An online presence on popular social media platforms can also help you reach a broader customer base. For a small fee many social media outlets offer a way to “boost” your posts to reach a larger audience. These social media venues also sometimes offer an array of online marketing courses on how to grow your business using their specific marketing tools.

### **What is “market research” and how can it help me sell my product?**

Market research is defined as research into the characteristics, spending habits, location, and needs of your business’s target customer base, the industry as a whole, and the particular

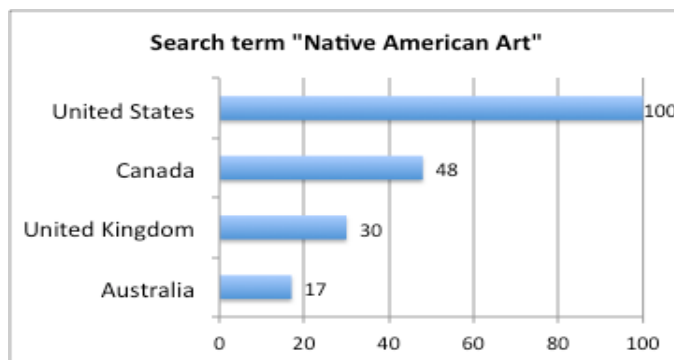
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<sup>5</sup> Cardamone, Megan, and Ruth Rentschler. "Indigenous Innovators: The Role of Web Marketing for Cultural Micro-enterprises." *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing* 11.4 (2006): 347-60. Web. 26 Sept. 2014.

competitors you face<sup>6</sup>. Finding out what type of person or population is most likely to purchase your product can greatly inform what type of marketing strategies you should use to reach those potential customers.

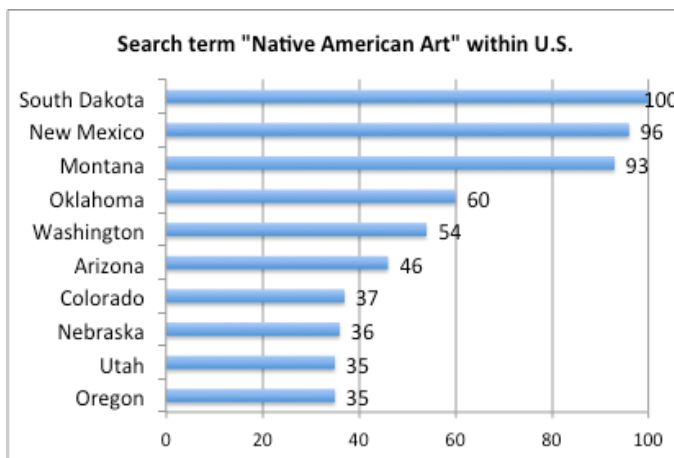
Existing market research is limited on Native American art. However, one study looked at where the phrase “Native American Art” was most searched on Google to determine which locations both domestically and internationally were most likely to be interested in purchasing Native American art.<sup>7</sup>

The study found that domestically, South Dakota, New Mexico, Montana, Oklahoma, and Washington, respectively, were the top five locations where the term “Native American Art” was searched.



Internationally, the study found the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, and Australia, respectively, were the top four locations where the term “Native American Art” was searched.<sup>9</sup>

Given this information, it might be wise to target potential customers



<sup>6</sup> <https://www.entrepreneur.com/encyclopedia/market-research>

<sup>7</sup> Begay, Faith <https://dukespace.lib.duke.edu/dspace/handle/10161/16686>

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*



located in these areas if selling Native American art.

### **What is the Quality Metrics Framework Guide and how might it help me?**

When determining price, appraising the level of quality of your product is important. Although assigning a particular grade or level of quality is not required, it can be helpful to you internally to figure out how to price your items. It may also give you some ideas on how to explain or describe how your product is of a higher level of quality in order to differentiate it from other competitors' products that may be of a lesser quality.

For help in determining your product's level of quality or how to differentiate quality levels between your products, you can consult the following Quality Metrics Framework Guide developed in *Opening Market Access for Lakota Artists and Artisans* by Faith Begay.<sup>10</sup> This guide looks at four different types of products: beadwork, moccasins, quilts, and clothing and garments.

For example, look at the guide's section on beadwork. Items with tight beadwork, meaning that the beadwork is evenly spaced and the beads are not crawling on top of each other, can be priced higher than baggy (more loosely stitched) beadwork. Furthermore, items beaded with smaller beads should be priced higher than items made with larger beads because it will take an artist more time to cover a surface area with smaller beads. Usually, with regards to bead size, the higher the number, the smaller the bead. For example, a size-13 bead is smaller than a size-10 bead.

#### **Product Type**

- Beadwork, Moccasins, Quilts, Clothing and Garments

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*



### *Beadwork*

- Tight or Baggy
  - Evenly spaced or crawling on top of each other
  - Tightly beaded or contains gaps
- On scale for item
  - i.e., sizes 13 or 15 size for baby moccasins and sizes 10 or 11 for adult moccasins (11 being better than 10).

### *Moccasins*

- Materials (type of leather)
  - Deer Skin
    - Grade
      - Grade 1 (Best, even texture and no holes)
      - Grade 2 (Some holes, but not in areas that a person will work with and not too varied in texture)
      - Grade 3 (Contains holes and varied texture, can be thin)
    - How leather was prepared
      - Hand Tanned (Best)
      - Premium Commercial Grade (Good)
      - Chrome Method
      - Commercial Grade
  - Buffalo
    - Grade
      - Grade 1 (Best, even texture and no holes)
      - Grade 2 (Some holes, but not in areas that a person will work with and not too varied in texture)
      - Grade 3 (Contains holes and varied texture, can be thin)
    - How leather was prepared
      - Hand Tanned (Best)

- Premium Commercial Grade (Good)
- Chrome Method
- Commercial Grade
- Cow Leather
  - Grade
    - Grade 1 (Best, even texture and no holes)
    - Grade 2 (Some holes, but not in areas that a person will work with and not too varied in texture)
    - Grade 3 (Contains holes and varied texture, can be thin)
  - How leather was prepared
    - Hand Tanned (Best)
    - Premium Commercial Grade (Good)
    - Chrome Method
    - Commercial Grade
- Quality of Stitching
  - Hand or Machine
    - (Leather responds best to hand-stitching)
  - Sewn from inside or outside
    - Sewing from inside is better, has a cleaner look, hides the stitching, helps prevent wear and tear
- Beaded or Quillwork

### *Quilts*

- Materials
  - 100% Cotton (Best)
  - Satin
    - Looks beautiful, but should be quilted using a small stitch
  - Contains Polyester

- Stay away from polyester
- Quality of Stitching
  - Hand or Machine
  - Is edging stitching even from the edge without gaps?
  - Is it perfectly done?

#### *Clothing and Garments*

- Materials
  - 100% cotton
  - Polyester
  - Leather (see moccasin section)
- Quality of Stitching
  - Are seams finished?
    - Finished seam or hanging thread?
  - Did the tailor press the item as they sewed?
    - Does the inside look as good as the outside?

#### **Want to learn more?**

Please click [here](#) to view all of our online IEED primers, which include topics such as “Financing a Tribal or Native-Owned Business”, “Making an Effective Business Presentation”, the “Buy Indian Opportunity” and much more!