



GWICH'IN TRIBAL COUNCIL

**MOOSEHIDE AND BEADS:
THE ART OF CREATING**

**ADHÒH NAAGAI HÀH:
EJÌCH'II K'E'TR'IJÀHKÀIH**



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INTRODUCTION

The main activities of the Gwich'in Tribal Council (GTC) involve Gwich'in cultural preservation, language preservation, education, economic development, assisting registered Gwich'in beneficiaries, and partnering with organizations in the four Gwich'in communities of Inuvik, Aklavik, Fort McPherson & Tsiigehtchic. The GTC mandate is to retain, preserve and enhance the traditional and cultural values, customs and language of the Gwich'in in a changing society; develop and promote economic, social, educational and cultural programs that will enable the Gwich'in to become self-sufficient and full participating members in a global society. The economic self-sufficiency and prosperity of Gwich'in is a key part of this mandate.

This research addressed the need to increase economic security of Gwich'in artists living in the Beaufort Delta Region. The objective was to determine what challenges exist for Northern creator's wishing to enter the arts and crafts economy. The intent was to explore the challenges and create opportunities which will allow success in this fast-growing market.

Arts and crafts are imperative from a social, cultural and economic lens. The practise of expression and creation of art commemorates, preserves and passes down culture and Indigenous knowledge throughout generations of learning and sharing.

An action plan has been driven from participant stories with the aim to assist with the development of a strong arts and craft sector. These opportunities will enhance the health and wellbeing of the arts sector in the NWT and provide Gwich'in Artists with meaningful opportunities to participate in the arts and crafts economy.

The aim was to hear from Gwich'in artists to explore the barriers they face in this competitive market and how we can overcome these barriers. The action plan is based on the needs identified by the people; it is based on what they want.



IMPORTANCE OF GWICH'IN ART

The Gwich'in are the most northerly Athapaskan people who occupy parts of the Yukon, Alaska and the Northwest Territories. Gwich'in traditional lands extend from the interior of the Yukon into the Mackenzie Basin and include the watersheds of the Peel, Mackenzie and Arctic Red Rivers. This vast landscape, along with the changing seasons of the Arctic climate creates the need for the Gwich'in peoples use of a variety of styles, materials and methods while creating clothing, housing, transportation and entertainment that would enable them to adapt and thrive in the North. Modern day creations of traditional necessities reflect the attractive and personal link to the past and provides an expression of the unique relationship that the Gwich'in have with the land.

The Gwich'in are well-known for their extravagant creations. This ranges from traditional clothing garments to adornments and fine jewellery.

The Gwich'in are well-known for their extravagant creations. This ranges from traditional clothing garments to adornments and fine jewellery which are normally made from tanned hides and resources from the land. Preparing hides is a lengthy process with significant meaning and teachings, the end process involves the hides being slowly smoked over a fire that preserves it and gives a distinct soft brown colour and warm Delta smell. Relationships with caribou are personal, depending on the individual life experience and social roles of both humans and caribou. For instance, women connected the sacredness of the caribou calving grounds to the sacredness of the birthing time, often reflecting on their own experiences of giving birth. (Kritsch & Wright-Fraser, 2002).



IMPORTANCE OF GWICH'IN ART

Cultural practices embodied in traditional crafts is an integral part of any Nation which mirrors the culture and tradition of a specific region. It is a way of preserving and promoting cultural and artistic traditions, such as various techniques and skills of traditional crafts that are transmitted from generation to generation. The unique cultural heritage of the Gwich'in is retained in their creations.

The GTC has continued to look for ways it can support local artists whether it is through collaborating with Territorial government programs, providing space and programming within GTC facilities and building supports through established programs for Gwich'in participants to benefit from. The hope is that through this search for information the GTC can tailor the needs expressed from the artists to better develop programs that will promote success.



COMMUNITY BENEFITS



The GTC recognizes that supporting arts and crafts will have lasting benefits for the North. The GTC continues to support ways to preserve, promote and grow Gwich'in artist's and their work. Research and the search for information through this project has demonstrated the themes of cultural, economic and social community benefits. The quotes below have been gathered by the many participants involved in this search.

CULTURAL BENEFITS

Cultural practices are embodied in traditional crafts and are reflected in the work of art produced from the Gwich'in Nation (Kritsch & Wright-Fraser, 2002). These practices are passed down throughout generations and create cultural pride for Northern artists. Creations provide the community with enjoyment and result in investments for future generations to enjoy.

"I didn't take any professional training. I watched my mom and my grandmother and that's how I started sewing"

"You can tell where the work is done by the style and colors and how it was sewed. Each community has a unique way of showcasing their culture and traditions in the work they do. My grandmother uses to look at a pair of slippers and be able to tell you who sewed them and where they were from".

HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Research demonstrates that art and the process of creating improves quality of life by reducing stress, building self-esteem and creating a sense of community through and between communities (Pöllänen, 2015). Participant stories demonstrate the intense relationships shared while creating art pieces. It was often described as a community process.

"I don't sew my slippers together, it's not something that I am good at. I usually do the preparation work and then one of my aunties sews them together. My mom passed on years ago and this gives me an opportunity to visit and share stories with them".

"There are so many health benefits when beading it really is a process of settling your mind. When I am sewing, I get many ideas that I bring into my work and life".

"I look at patterns and see how people mix the colors and stitches. I started with embroidery with the advice of my Grandmother. I used a color wheel for inspiration. I taught myself different ways to put things together and it helped with my confidence. I explored with different mediums and it helped with meeting people because I often had questions. Seeking knowledge and going off the advice of my Grandmother allowed me to move forward with my projects".

"I put good thoughts into every bead that I sew"

ECONOMIC BENEFITS

Direct economic benefits consist of employment opportunities, community spending and partnerships. These benefits contribute to creating a stronger North by promoting cultural expression through an economic means. Gwich'in expressions through the creation of art impacts all ages, genders and communities.

"I sell a lot of my projects online. The Great Northern Arts Festival is very supportive of artists they provide funding to support me to get materials, this partnership allowed me to learn new skills and sell my products".

"Craft sales are a great support for local artists".

"Lately there have been a lot of project which require collaboration. This creates opportunities to profit and also network and trade projects. There is a strong arts and crafts community, and we are connecting not only be region but across territories and provinces".



ARTIST: DIANE KYIKAVICHIK-BAXTER

INDUSTRY AT A GLANCE

An industry scan was completed from various sources. There is limited data exclusive to the community context however, this data illustrates the significance of the arts and crafts sector in the Territorial context.

The NWT Bureau of Statistics GDP chart indicates that from 1999 – 2013 the arts, entertainment and recreation sectors generated an average revenue of 10.1 to 11.9 million. This began to gradually decline from 2014 to 2019 with a 50% decline in 2020 due to the COVID pandemic (NWT Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Further in 2018 the NWT Bureau of Statistics produced a report titled Persons Who Engaged in Traditional Activities those that produced arts and crafts made up 22% of the NWT population of those people 57% identified as being Indigenous and almost 30% of those came from the Beaufort Delta (NWT Bureau of Statistics, 2021).

The NWT Arts Program is a marketing tool that assist artists to connect with other artists and to promote their work. The number of registered artists in the Northwest Territories increased from 173 to 450 from 2014 to 2018 (NWT Arts, 2019).

SWOT ANALYSIS



Strengths

Cultural knowledge - Gwich'in have their own unique style of expressing their culture that is distinct from other Indigenous peoples.

Experience - There are many creators in the Beaufort-Delta region who have been creating their pieces of work for many years.

Family connection with styles

Knowledge of processing raw materials

Weaknesses

Access to market - The remoteness of the North makes it more challenging for creators to get their products in consumers hands.

Increased shipping/ordering costs

Brand awareness - Some creators have not yet developed their brand or marketing strategy which will influence their selling power.

Limited infrastructure for production of work

Opportunities

Growing interest in Indigenous art

Online platforms provide a service that allows producers to reach consumers in a direct and timely fashion. It also provides a pathway to overcome the barrier of reaching a broader market.

Collaboration among creators can reduce marketing costs if they pool their resources together. It also gives the consumer an opportunity to view collaborative artistic pieces

Centre for Arts Crafts and Technology

Indigenous knowledge of raw materials and processing these materials

Quality of natural resources

Threats

Marketing costs

Mass production of Indigenous styles

Cultural Appropriation

Appropriate pricing of work

Intellectual property (someone copying your idea and producing it cheaper)

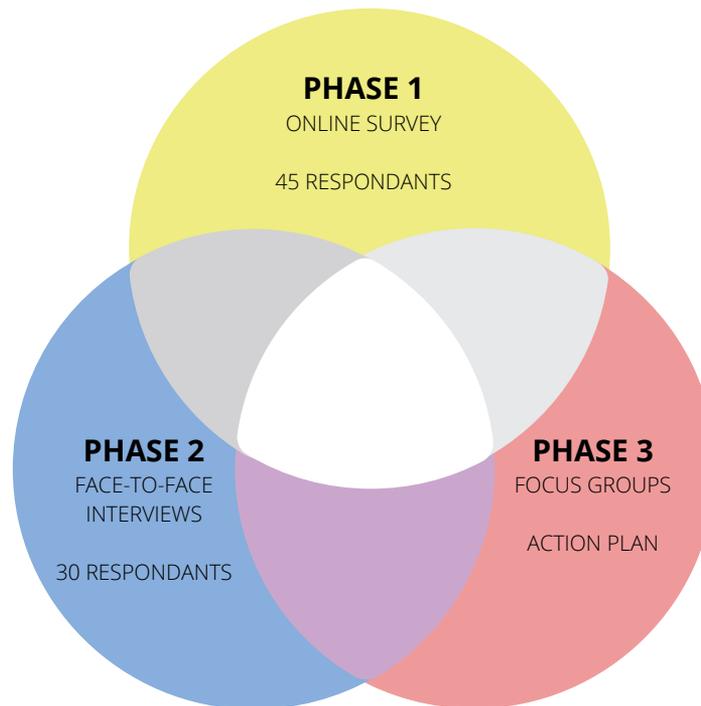
COVID

Limited access to supplies and raw material

Program funding requirements are limiting, time consuming and difficult to access

Synthetic or below grade material

PHASES OF RESEARCH



COMMUNITY CONSULTATION

The Northern experience navigating the global pandemic of COVID 19 has shed light on the importance of art in our lives and communities. Art inspires and influences us, creates pride in our communities, and serves as a means to bring us together.

Preliminary research was conducted with stakeholders throughout the North to gather insight into current opportunities to gauge what barriers are perceived from a program management perspective. Through this, recommendations were received and implemented in the development of the research methods to ensure voices of the artists were being upheld.

- Emerging and established Gwich'in artists
- Arts organizations serving the North
- NWT Arts Council
- Great Northern Arts Festival
- GNWT
- National and International arts organizations

A number of themes emerged from the online survey, conversation-based interviews and focus groups that have directed the action plan. This research was driven by the voices and experiences of Gwich'in artists in the North.

METHODOLOGY

In this section I discuss the research methodology used for this search which is rooted in a Gwich'in research framework along with a gender-based analysis (GBA+) lens to ensure diversity and inclusivity. This search explored Gwich'in artists experiences and heard stories on how we can overcome barriers in this industry. It is essential to ensure that the voices of the Gwich'in artists are valued and at the centre of this research. Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991) developed the 4R's as a framework for Indigenizing efforts. These include respect, reciprocity, relevance and responsibility. The 4R's are foundational values and represent perspectives of respect for Indigenous ways of knowing, reciprocity in relationships, relevant programs, services and research and the responsibility to take control.

Given the current COVID-19 pandemic and restrictions, which change daily, a survey was created to allow participation from various areas to bring forth their concerns. This created a venue to share experiences and stories at the convenience of their home. Conversation-based interviews were scheduled using Zoom, or through the telephone. Prior to meetings being scheduled, I had telephone conversations with participants to ensure they were comfortable with the questions, process and verbal consent was received, during this time relationships were built through the sharing of stories and intent of the research. Focus groups were organized to provide updates on the search and encourage discourse around overcoming barriers. These groups helped drive the shorter term and long terms actions included in this report.



ARTIST: DENISE MACDONALD

GENDER-BASED ANALYSIS (GBA+) LENS

Through this work a gender-based analysis (GBA+) lens was used which is an intersectional analytical process for examining how various intersecting identity factors impact the effectiveness of initiatives. GBA+ was used while designing and analysing the research, this included broadening our target group to include men, non-binary and LGBTQ2S+ participants. The intersecting identities we took into account are location, Northern, culture, Gwich'in, occupation, arts and gender. Phone surveys were completed for individuals who did not have access to a computer and internet.

GWICH'IN RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

A Gwich'in research framework that embraces relevance, responsibility, respect, and reciprocity with relationality as the fastening component guided this approach. This research ensured that methods were relevant to Gwich'in perspectives and experiences, that respect at all levels was maintained throughout the research process, reciprocal relationships were fostered with participants and stakeholder, and responsibility was demonstrated through all forms of participation. Reciprocity within an Indigenous research paradigm requires relationship through listening and learning from each other and exchanging ideas.

ONLINE SURVEY

To begin gathering data an online survey was created using google forms to provide an easy, accessible platform for Gwich'in Northern artists to provide feedback, concerns and comments surrounding the barriers they face in the arts and crafts economy and also how we can overcome these barriers.

The outcomes of the survey provided quantitative and qualitative measurements of issues, experiences, barriers and future expectations. Participation in this research was completely voluntary. During the survey, participants had the right to refuse to respond to any questions and also include comments if there were concerns or areas missed. Participants could withdraw from the survey at any time during the research, skip questions that were not relevant and provide feedback as necessary. Participants received a \$25.00 as a gesture of appreciation for sharing their experiences. There was no consequence for withdrawing from the research.

Survey respondents had multiple opportunities to provide comments on the barriers they faced in their arts practice, specifically Northern barriers, and what solutions they felt could result in overcoming these challenges.



CONVERSATION- BASED INTERVIEWS

I used a purposive sampling method to recruit participants, Patron (1995), which is described as a method of targeting information rich cases to enhance the study. I also relied on word of mouth and referrals. I drew upon my own connection to the Gwich'in community and knowledge of Northern artists.

The conversation-based interviews consisted of open-ended questions that served as a guide for conversations to occur. This approach respects oral traditions as a means of sharing knowledge and is grounded in relational accountability. To retain Indigenous knowledge and to pass on culture and history, storytelling is a common method, this approach of inquiry supported the Gwich'in way of passing down information.

Meetings, on average, lasted between 30-45 minutes and started with a discussion around process and protocols which intended to answer questions and develop relationships with participants. Participants were given an honorarium of \$100 for sharing their stories.

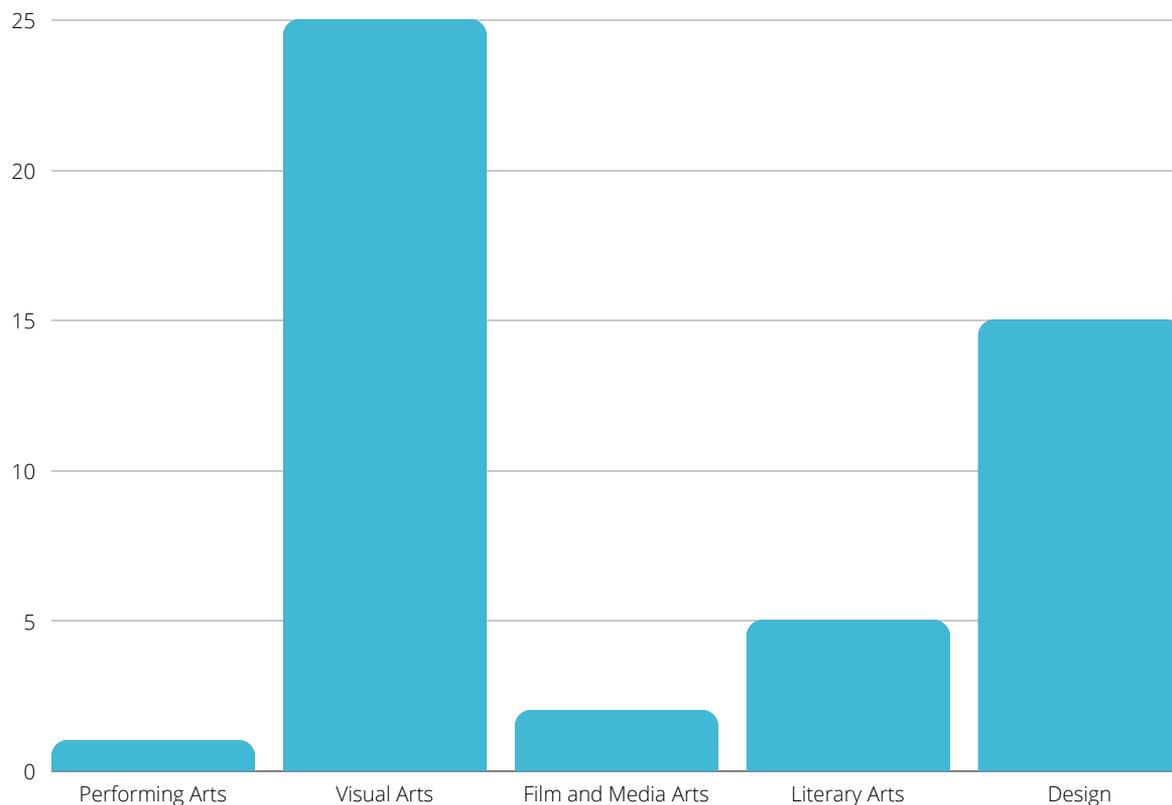
The benefit of taking part in this study was the opportunity to share stories and experiences. These stories provided an understanding of how Gwich'in artists experience barriers within this competitive industry and how we can overcome these barriers. All identifying information shared from the conversations was only referred to in broad terms, avoiding specifics that might lead to the identification of individual participants was avoided. No personal or identifying information is disclosed.

SURVEY RESULTS

The survey was advertised from April 20, 2021 to May 21, 2021 using online platforms and GTC office space. There was a total of 35 respondents between the ages of 18 and 45+ which captured the diversity of ages and varied experience levels. Respondents included 29 women and 6 men with the majority of participants from Inuvik, Fort MacPherson and Aklavik. The range of experiences varied, 12 respondents: 0-5 years of experience, 4 respondents: 5-10 years of experience, 7 respondents: 15-20 years of experience and 12 respondents: 20+ years of experience.

All respondents were asked to select how they identify as an artist, they were able to choose multiple categories as they relate to them. Categories consisted of performing arts, visual arts and crafts, film and media arts, literary arts and design.

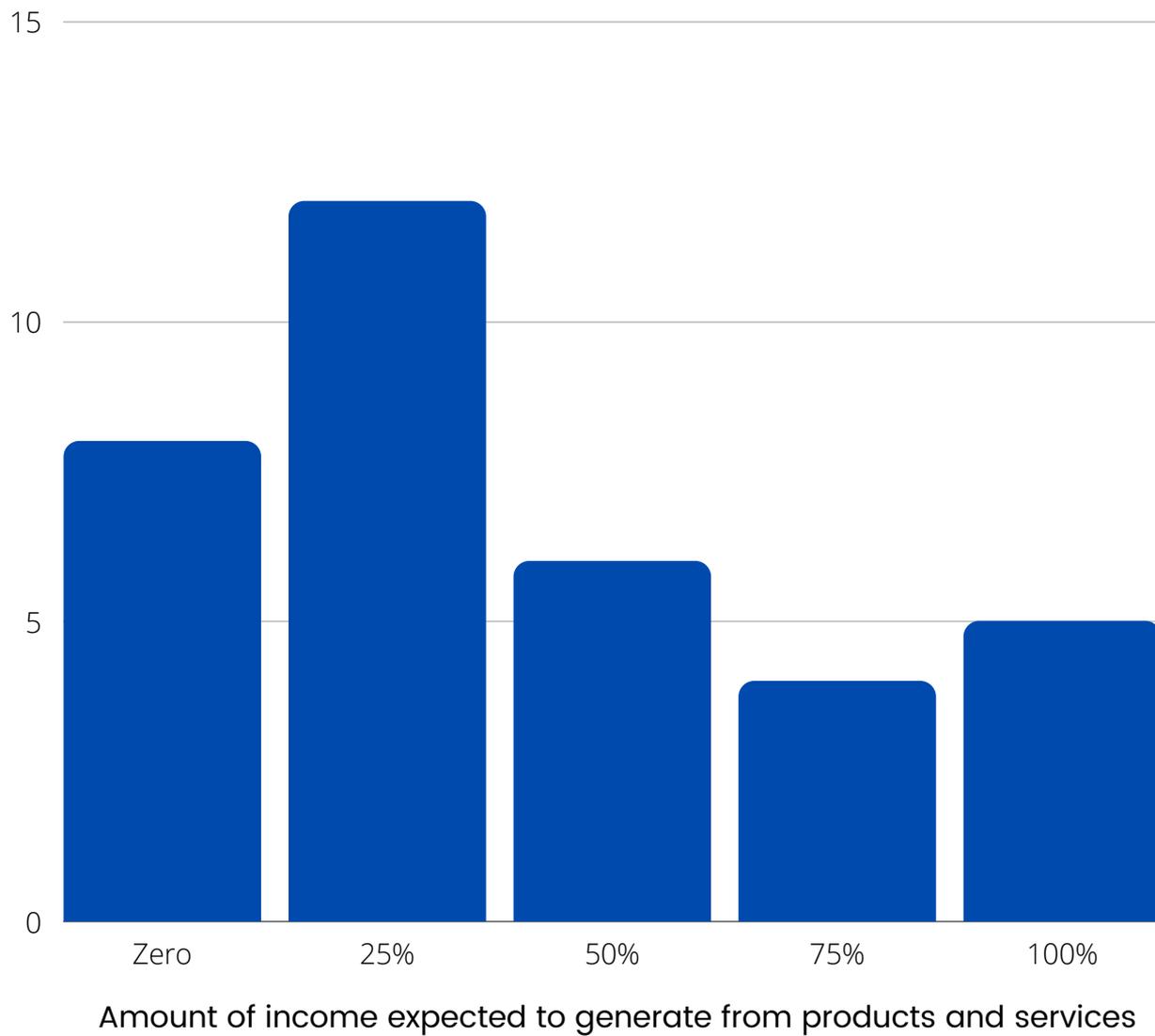
Identification of Artist



SURVEY RESULTS

Total Desired Income from Products and Services

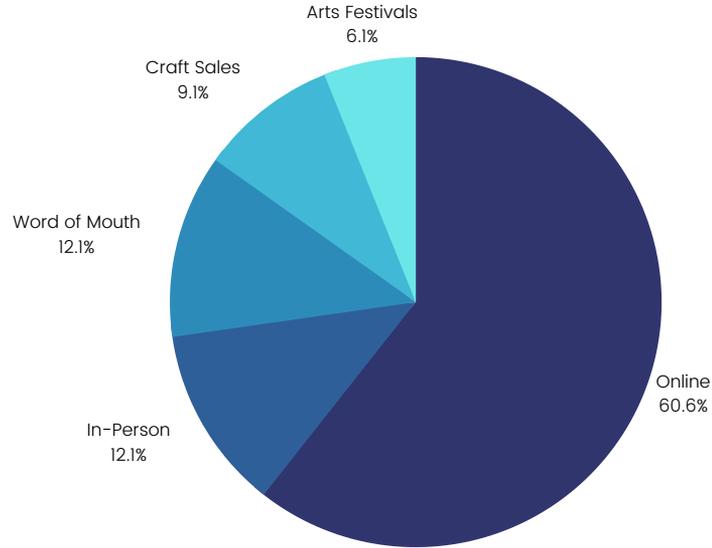
Below is a chart indicating the number of participants and what they had expected to generate for income from their products and services. This shows that many Gwich'in artists rely heavily on their products and services to provide for themselves.



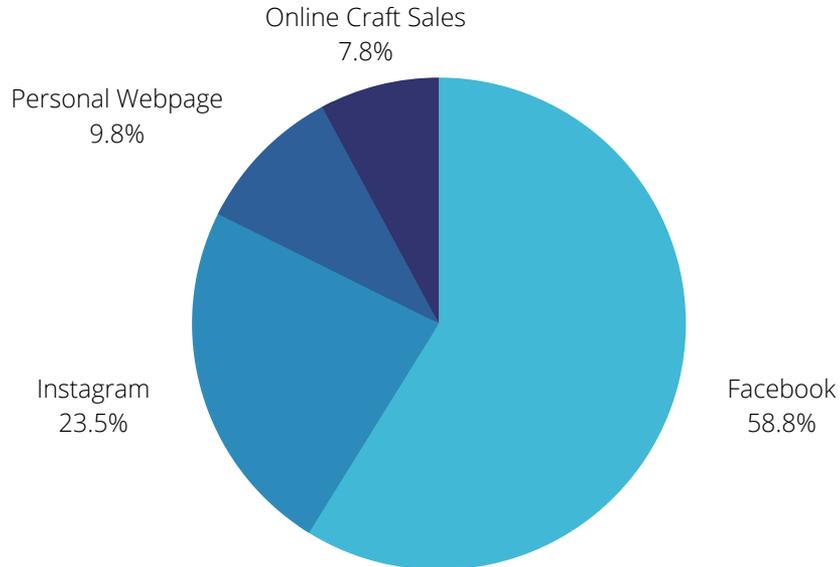
SURVEY RESULTS

Product Sales

Respondents indicated that products and services were sold in the following ways:



From these results it was determined that respondents that were using online platforms used the following venues to sell their products and services.



For those participants that did not sell online, access to computer, access to reliable internet and difficulty navigating the internet and creating appropriate accounts to sell products and services were identified as barriers to using online platforms.



SURVEY RESULTS

Barriers Distributing and Selling Products

The barriers identified to distributing and selling products and services were described in the following ways: 44% (15) expressed that pricing of work was a barrier and buyers understanding of the value and prices of work, 38% (13) said they struggled with the costs of materials along with shipping costs when ordering online, 23% (8) expressed that they had difficulty accessing business support, 18% (6) identified the difficulty of creating accounts using online platforms to sell their work as a barrier, 20% (7) said they struggled to find customers to purchase their work.

Barriers Unique to the North

Barriers that were unique to the North consisted of the following: 80% (27) of respondents confirmed that cost of supplies was a barrier, 55% (19) confirmed that availability of supplies was a barrier and 30% (9) did not feel comfortable with purchasing materials online. 35% (12) confirmed that access to raw materials was a barrier, when broken down further it was confirmed that the cost of hides and access to hides was a significant barrier. Access to professional development opportunities through arts and craft workshops was identified as a barrier and considered an opportunity to draw upon.

SNAPSHOT OF FINDINGS

Several key barriers emerged throughout the survey, conversation-based interviews and focus groups. Artists agree that strengthening the arts sector and investing in sustainable models of development involves collaborating with organizations to share and promote skills and talents. There is a desire to have workshops in collaboration with other organizations to build on the knowledge, skills and abilities of one another. Discussions around access to better quality materials and supplies was expressed. There is also the need to adapt to emerging communication technologies and markets to provide opportunities for artists to grow and to promote inclusivity. The themes which emerged have been categorized into accessibility of materials, information, changing markets and infrastructure.

ACCESSING MATERIALS

A common subject during this search was the idea of building capacity through traditional art practices. The cost of moose hide, furs and other animal resources makes them scarce and unaffordable. These are skills that Indigenous people have been using for time immemorial and are essential to keep the health and wellbeing of communities strong. Indigenous knowledge keepers and Elders are assets within communities and have the experience and skills to teach these processes.

"Moose skins are expensive, and hard to find. Furs are expensive and bought commercially. We need to bring back these skills to empower our people. You see it all over the North, there are efforts to revitalize these skills. The Gwich'in need to make it a priority to bring back the skill of tanning hides and preparing furs. This will also help us strengthen as a community. We've lost it before, it's time we start putting value back into these processes".

We have seen that hide tanning can happen in the bush, in people's yards, on the land and in the city as demonstrated by the urban hide tanning project (Dene Nahjo, n.d). This process of tanning hides involves restoring the value of traditional practices through sharing knowledge and stories which involves remembering, restoring and reclaiming Indigenous wisdom.

Accessing materials also includes accessing quality products. There are limited places that Northern artists can access materials, and many are not comfortable with purchasing online for a number of reasons which are quality of products, insecurity with process, shipping costs and hidden fees.

SNAPSHOT OF FINDINGS

"Access to quality material is limited and the cost can be outrageous. It's hard to find the materials you need in the NWT and the wait time when you order is long, and shipping is costly".

"I wish we had a local Gwich'in owned craft store where we could purchase our supplies. It's hard to go into Inuvik and buy everything it requires you to really plan your projects out. Sometimes they run out of supplies and you are stuck with a half-finished project. Who wants to buy one slipper?"

ACCESSING INFORMATION

Throughout the sharing of stories participants expressed the frustration, confusion and intimidation they experienced with the current programs, services and funding opportunities that were available. Some were able to access funding and support but expressed that in the end it didn't seem worth the trouble because the process was not accommodating. Many participants had heard of programs, but they were either unaware what they were eligible for or found the application process to be confusing, time consuming and unsupportive.

"I have to come back with quotes, receipts and a proposal. The information is too much, it's scary, time consuming and a lot of work for minimal support. Some people probably don't even understand what they are doing. There are programs out there but when you aren't online it's hard to know what is going on. It would be nice if there was a place you could go to get support and information, but everything seems to be online"

Another area of concern was not having the knowledge to effectively run a business. Participants wanted assurance that they were completing the appropriate applications, applying for the right licences and following the rules but had limited access to the information they needed.

"The art industry is not taken seriously. It would be great if there was training on how to run an Art business. There are so many grants and financial support available, but it requires you to have basic business start-up training in most applications. I worry that if I open up a business, I will somehow be penalized at tax time if I am not sure the proper way to run a business".

SNAPSHOT OF FINDINGS

These changing times have also created markets which at times undercut the pricing strategy of artists. This creates vulnerability and insecurity for artists to price their work. Pricing was often described as a stressful process and things such as talent, time and materials was not considered. There was a common concern felt by participants that consistent pricing was needed throughout the North to ensure that handmade original pieces of work were being valued and that reputations of artists were being respected.

"I have been sewing every bead for the past 20 years. Lately with all the increased prices to products and limited moose hides, pricing my work is hard. As artists we need to put consistent value on our products. There are times I have been bullied into selling items at a lower price".

"I have had many jobs and was fortunate to be involved in many projects throughout the North but the most pride I have is in the art that I make. I feel pride knowing that I am carrying on the traditions of my grandmothers and it also provides a connection to where we are from. We have to make sure that this is reflected in the price of our work"

Another worry was having access to information regarding available opportunities. Many of the artists do not have access to online environments where most of the opportunities are marketed. Having a central hub for opportunities would increase inclusivity and allow for streamlined information.

"There are arts contests, telephone book contest. A lot of stuff is done online, and it would be helpful to know this information. I feel like I miss out on everything"

"The work that we are producing in the Delta is just as good if not better than what is being sold in high end boutiques. If we had help accessing this market, we wouldn't have to price our items lower than what they are worth"

ARTIST: SHARON ANNE FIRTH



SNAPSHOT OF FINDINGS

ACCESSING MARKET

Changing times has created new market environments which have pushed the arts industry online. This process can be daunting and requires a different and unique type of preparation, presentation and purchasing. There is an advantage to these virtual environments, and they create consistency in a time where COVID restrictions change daily. It is essential for artists to create an online presence whether it is through their social media accounts or a website. The benefits of creating a website is the accessibility to a larger market and a way to track products and interest.

"It would be nice if there was an online craft sale or if the GTC had a website that they maintained for artists to sell their work online. Everyone sells their stuff online. I can sell my stuff on Facebook, but I don't know how to create a website and a lot of people in the communities don't have reliable internet or a computer to do these types of transactions".

"We are in an era of resurgence which means the appreciation, knowledge and understanding of the authenticity of our creations is happening. We need to make sure our artists have access to these markets"

ACCESSING INFRASTRUCTURE

Concerns around accessing space to work was brought forward. Many Artists work out of their home which made it difficult to work without interruptions. Artists often discussed the idea of sharing skills but there was no place to do this. There was also the discussion that creating a space to promote and sell artist's work would be beneficial. Affordable, accessible and safe infrastructure is needed.

"I would love to see capacity building for Artists. If there is a common space available for people to meet and do artwork. This is a sense of community which at the end of the day makes us more connected and stronger... it would be beneficial if there were workshops and teaching spaces. I would love to have the opportunity to teach"

ARTIST: DONNA BLAKE



ACTION PLAN

Objective 1: Develop a communication stream which brings awareness of programs, highlights services and promotes opportunities. This will address the barriers identified in accessing information and services

Short Term Actions

- Create an online environment that coincides events, festivals, programs, contests which can be shared online and printed for those that do not have access to online environments
- Encourage the collaboration between Northern arts organizations and artists across the North
- Partner with Industry Tourism and Investment to encourage accessibility of programs, services
- Collaborate with Northern arts organizations to provide opportunities for hands on training, workshops and sewing groups
- encourage networking opportunities and knowledge sharing for artists and arts organizations

Objective 2: Invest, partner and collaborate with arts organizations and communities to ensure accessibility of current and future facility infrastructure

Short Term Actions

- create spaces for artists to do their work
- collaborate with arts organizations for space for Gwich'in artists to sell their arts and crafts
- Improve and increase spaces for artists to sell their work
- promote culturally safe and reflective spaces by incorporating locally produced art
- provide membership fees waivers

create opportunities to access materials, equipment and technology

Objective 3 (a): Create opportunities to access affordable, quality materials for Artists

Short Term Actions

- collaborate with artists and communities to purchase in bulk
- provide avenues and support for artists to purchase materials online

Objective 3 (b): Support opportunities for access to quality traditional raw materials

Long Term Actions

- create opportunities to tan moose hides (work with the harvesters to align season with product)
- create opportunities to tan and work with fur
- create opportunities to learn about traditional tools
- create opportunities for Fish leather workshops
- create opportunities to work with bones, antlers and body materials

Objective 4: Create opportunities and support artists with accessing markets to promote and sell their work

Short Term

- collaborate with organizations to create opportunities accessing online markets

MOVING FORWARD

The GTC will continue to partner with Indigenous and Northern organizations to create opportunities for artists to prosper in this economy.

This Action Plan has set objectives with short term and long-term actions for the GTC to work towards. These are the beginning steps. The GTC is devoted to creating measures beyond the lifetime of the Action Plan and is dedicated to working in partnership Indigenous and Northern organizations to create meaningful opportunities for artists.



ARTIST: SHARON ANNE FIRTH

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