

Meet John a 38 year old account executive, employed by a leading Canadian Financial Institution. His mandate is to develop new business, introducing financial services to SMEs. Reaching out to Aboriginal businesses has become an attractive market segment for growing the Institution's financial services portfolio, Aboriginal business ownership has grown from some 4,000 corporations in the 90's to today's estimate of 40,000. However, John faces many challenges to reach his goals:

Competitive market place. The rapid growth of Aboriginal business ownership, the billions of dollars in land claim settlements, and the more than 500 natural resources projects representing over \$500 billion in new investments proposed across Canada in the next decade make the Aboriginal market place most attractive. This market segment has become a very competitive arena for the financial services industry.

In the last 10 to 15 years financial institutions have fought hard to achieve market dominance of Aboriginal financial business. New financial institutions were created, credit unions, trusts and other institutions have also entered the fray. Aboriginal Banking Teams have been hired. To earn the allegiance of Aboriginal peoples, companies have increased their financial contributions to social, educational and other Aboriginal causes in recent years. New financial services branches were opened in larger Aboriginal communities across-Canada. Now the battle for dominance is reaching new heights thanks to the rolling-out of new mini-digital service centres as smaller communities come within reach.

Disperse Geography. The wide dissemination of Aboriginal peoples across Canada's vast territory made it expensive for John to travel to selected communities in order to develop relationships. Travelling so often also exerted its toll on John and his family. He was becoming increasingly concerned with having to be away so often from his growing family. He also realized that despite his efforts, sporadic contact wasn't very conducive to developing relationships of trust over time. John needed a 'better way' a *cost efficient method to deepen his firm's relationships with Aboriginal people*. The trust of Aboriginal people in the brand had to become strong enough to favourably dispose his potential clients towards his company.

The dilemma. John knew that he had to figure a way to increase his brand's competitive differentiation. His knowledge of Aboriginal culture told him they had to enter into a collaborative dialogue with his Aboriginal audience if trust was to be developed over time. For him *trust was another way of saying leadership*. He also knew that to capture the loyalty/allegiance of his audience a good place to start was by helping Aboriginal people enhance their quest for sustainable economic well-being. John's inability to create this competitive edge more efficiently was costing his company sales and him bonuses.

Meeting ICN. At John's suggestion, Helen (head of sales) met with the Idea Connector Network. ICN specializes in facilitating dialogue among members of Aboriginal communities, corporations and all levels of government on issues affecting business relationships and influencing economic development opportunities for Aboriginal people and their communities. Helen was impressed to see how much ICN knew about the challenges facing her industry and with the fact that ICN had standardized processes, a holistic process that resulted in the alignment of Helen's corporate goals and objectives with her selected audience's needs, marrying products-services and topic.

The team realized that it was on that foundation that ICN would create tailored solutions to help her team meet their business engagement needs: *a collaborative partnership focused on enhancing Aboriginal entrepreneurship capabilities while increasing corporate competitive differentiation.* Although ICN would provide a turnkey solution, their corporate talent at all levels of the firm also needed to engage very effectively in the dialogue with their selected audience with minimum impact on their busy schedules.

A day in the life (after). Helen's and John's first priority was to promote their Financial Institution's small business solutions. Two market segments had been identified: aspiring entrepreneurs and small business owners. An ICN solution was designed to their specific needs. A plan for implementation over the next twelve-months identified topics to be explored by ICN hosts with the help of invited experts. The selected audience would be engaged, using a combination of webinars, peer advisory groups, corporate talent, and outreach activities (PR, social media, traditional media and e-mail campaigns) complemented by white papers, articles and corporate information needed for audience self-actualization. While the solution was rolled-out and viewers registered to participate, ICN pulled its chair closer to viewers and started to ask feedback questions, track answers and other metrics to compare them to pre-set key performance indicators (KPIs). ICN reported back to Helen on a regular basis, together they reviewed KPIs; as the program was rolled out dots were connected and the plan tweaked and adapted as needed. After a couple months, at a regular review meeting, Helen said: *"Hey what you guys are doing is really neat. I have told our HR folks about our partnership and they would like to meet and see if you might help them with recruiting Aboriginal people."*