

# Entrepreneur Turns to Lessons from the Land to Navigate COVID-19

By Brenda Dragon

**W**hen the pandemic hit in March, I became very worried for my loved ones and for all of humanity. When the Northwest Territories borders closed to travellers, my anxieties heightened as I knew that fifty per cent of our revenue comes from retailers, many of which are tied to tourism.

For the past five years, we have worked very hard to build Aurora Heat—a northern Indigenous business that offers sustainable products—to where we are today. The uncertainty of COVID-19 made our growth uncertain.

Aurora Heat offers natural and reusable fur warmers that our customers across North America now tuck into their mitts, hats, boots and pockets to replace the need for single-use and chemical-based warmers. Our products are made of premium sheared beaver fur and inspired by my family's roots as trappers in Northern Canada. I've spent a lot of time on the Land, and like many northern Indigenous People, I have been taught survival from Nature. This reminded me of my inherent resilience.

I resisted the feelings of impending doom and went into action. My goal was absolute: I was going to carry Aurora Heat to a better place post-pandemic. We're certainly still swimming to remain above water, but what follows are the core activities that have kept us afloat. My hope is that they might help you persevere during these unsettling times.

## Make Time to Take Stock

Even if you feel too busy fighting fires, you need a sound strategy to navigate the pandemic. I needed support, so I brought on a vibrant young business consultant. Together, we assessed the must-dos to continue bringing in revenue and what could be put aside. Most importantly, we identified areas to improve user experiences within our online sales channels knowing that this is where we'd make up lost revenue.

## Check In with Your Customers

In exchange for a discount code, we sent out a short online survey to get a pulse on what customers continue to love about Aurora Heat. We gained valuable insights that have



*Brenda Dragon and her daughter Chloe Dragon Smith enjoying traditional winters on the Land in Fort Smith, Northwest Territories.*

allowed us to hone in on the core brand values that keep customers coming back, which has fed updated messaging on our new website.

## Apply for Grants

There are many grants and wage subsidy options out there for Indigenous-owned businesses and women. Apply for them all. We used this federal grant finder: [innovation.ised-isde.canada.ca](http://innovation.ised-isde.canada.ca).

## Make Changes for Remote Working and Safety

Centralize your documents so staff can work virtually together! We migrated to the cloud. Now our remote team can seamlessly work from home and access everything they need. For our artisans in the Fort Smith workshop, we've implemented health and safety protocols based on guidelines from health authorities.

## Innovate and Create

Shifting gears from normal activities, I prototyped many of the products that had been percolating in my mind. Some of the new products were even inspired by customers in the survey. I'm pleased to share that we've launched a handful of new products, from

unique earrings to traditional beaded cell phone warmers!

## Be Brave and Pivot

Knowing that retail wholesales would continue to struggle, we've worked hard to launch a new website with better marketing analytics and improved user experiences. With better data, we now can see the social ads that resonate with our core customer groups all over the world.

COVID-19 has brought forth a few positives; I chose to realize some for Aurora Heat, and I hope there will be some for your business too. It forced us to dig deep, pull our best selves forward and persevere. Being outdoors is now a safer place for kids, families and friends to be together. Our strength is offering traditional Dēnesūliné ways of keeping warm and comfortable in the cold. We are excited to continue bringing our way of life to Canadians, and increasingly global communities. **✶**

Brenda Dragon, a Dēnesūliné and French Canadian woman, is the designer and founder of Aurora Heat, Inc. which is based in Fort Smith, Northwest Territories, Canada.