

ENTREPRENEURIAL

Spirit

Written and photographed by Lesanne Brooke



Small businesses, social responsibility and success – a Rustenburg workshop brings together ingredients for economic development in local communities.

There is a groundswell of inspiring North West entrepreneurs, each overcoming limitations and setting their sights on success. Such were the twelve women who gathered at the Rustenburg Boutique Hotel to explore ways of marketing their diverse businesses.

The two day *Marketing Yourself Effectively* workshop provided an opportunity for the business owners to assess marketing strategy, hone valuable skills and consider new ideas. The businesses were creatively diverse: wedding dresses, traditional goat farming, building, plumbing, catering, event management, canvas products, school uniforms, jewellery design and mining overalls. Each woman had started her business from scratch, been through lengthy processes to become registered, overcome incredible odds and reached a point where new input and brainstorming with like-minded dynamos was welcome support.

Take Nkae Lydia Pilane, from Baa-Lerona Co-op. She makes uniforms, specialising in embroidering logos and names. Her focus is on sturdy quality and attention to detail and she employs a team of workers. Past conventional retiring age, her dedication is ceaseless and she is always looking to access different markets. She has recently landed a contract to make uniforms for the mines.

Her equipment is expensive, payment is often slow and the business can be sporadic. At home she cares for sixteen orphans whilst at work she cares for her staff's well-being, aware of her responsibility towards their families.

Bokao Theka, from Wilhie Canvas Industries, is young, determined and relentlessly forging her way forward. She says she is the first woman to own a canvas company. She produces durable canvas goods from awnings and gazebo's to tents, pencil cases and carrier bags. Petite and groomed, she is challenged by the response she gets as a woman in her industry.

Natureal Jewellery Design owner, Mmathapelo Rakate, creates bespoke jewellery using precious metals and stones, but wears none. Apparently, when she wears her jewellery people insist on borrowing or taking the pieces as samples, and because she is young and keen to expand her business, she struggles to say no to those who can't resist her designs.

The challenges of working alone, cash flow, staff issues and building a business in economically challenging times weigh heavily. For most of the business owners, two days in the serene surroundings of the guest house focussing only on the specifics of marketing, provided welcome relief. Faces flushed as discussions about client care, marketing techniques and presenting the business engaged them and reminded them of the bigger picture.

The workshop involved them all as they practiced making

presentations, looked at the personality of their brands, considered marketing trends and identified their unique selling points. The women shared experiences of being forced to diversify to survive; discussed ways of overcoming the challenge of expensive contracts that pay late; and found common ground and opportunities to work together. They also developed and practiced specific skills, all the while laughing and debating.

Often feeling isolated with their problems, there were joyous revelations as the women identified strengths and skills previously taken for granted. Norah Mosenye was delighted as she recognised the value she can add by using her vast knowledge of wedding organisation at a time when clients need such information; Sarita Sesika told every one about her glorious spicy flavours, realising that this is what makes her catering particularly desirable; and Dorothy Toute discovered that her indigenous goats are in demand because of their resistance to disease, as well as their meat and milk.

The workshop was funded and facilitated by Dialogue Communications Training, an organisation of specialist communications facilitators. Passionate about what they do and committed to sharing and developing these skills, they approached Bonjanala Platinum District's Mining and Enterprise Development asking for people who would most benefit from training, but did not usually have access. As part of their Corporate Social Investment, Dialogue takes a percentage of their annual profits and spends it in this way, ensuring that training reaches people for whom it will have real meaning and value.

Understandably Thabo Mashomo, the Enterprise Development Officer, jumped at the opportunity. He co-ordinated the group of entrepreneurial women from the outreaches of his area, including Swartruggens, Brits, Derby and the outskirts of Rustenburg.

Business development often has an urban focus and overlooks the specific challenges that are faced by small businesses in rural or semi-urban areas. At this workshop it was clear that the vision is not in short supply, and each business adds value to their communities and commits to social responsibility in ways that are humbling and deserve intelligent support. The challenges are lack of access to basic supplies and limited cash flow. This workshop provided clear evidence that skills development for small business owners is imperative. Business challenges are multiplied in limited circumstances and can overwhelm the talent and dedication. If this happens, it is not just a business that closes; it is a community of people that loses out.

So, after developing their voices, projecting their images, defining their products and sharing inspirations, hopefully each of these women will set forth with renewed vigour and warrior-like determination. Their spirit and ability to rise above daily challenges was inspiring. May doors open as a result of their new skills and may their businesses bloom like spring flowers! ■

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