

From trash to cash: CA cleans up with new approach to socially responsible consumerism

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Can you take socially responsible consumerism and turn it into a business? Naomi Ledoux, a working mom from PE with a CA(SA) background, has by turning trash into handcrafted handbags.



The rise of socially responsible consumerism makes it clearer now in 2019 than ever before that humanity needs to reduce our ecological footprint by changing the way we produce, consume and dispose of goods and resources. So it is no wonder that the latest social media [#trashtag clean-up challenge](#) has gone viral. The campaign sees bored teens take a 'before' snap of a polluted area in their community, followed by an 'after' shot of the area after an hour of intense clean-up. This

But can you take socially responsible consumerism and turn it into a business?

Naomi Ledoux, a working mom from PE with a CA(SA) background has done just that. By putting a positive spin on the situation with her 'waste to most-wanted' business, MyAfricanMum, Naomi has engaged with communities in the Eastern Cape to collect wrappers from the likes of sweets, cool drinks, biscuits and chocolates, and upcycle them into bespoke, handcrafted handbags and journal covers. Launched in 2016, MyAfricanMum's main collection, The Unwrapping Sweet Conversation, is so popular that there was a three-month waiting list for items in the collection. Its newest collection, Jolli Happy, launched on 1 March 2019, and another collection is in the pipeline thanks to a major luxury chocolate brand's involvement.

While that is a sparkling entrepreneurial business success all round, MyAfricanMum's business approach is making a valuable contribution to the United Nations (UN)'s 12th sustainable development goal (SDG), of responsible consumption and production. It also contributes to SDGs 5 and 8, of gender equality and decent work and employment respectively, by employing a handful of previously unemployed stay-at-home moms for the production of these covetable products.



The sweet taste of entrepreneurial success

Naomi, who was previously part of PricewaterhouseCoopers' global audit team, says her CA(SA) skills bring “determination and persistence – the will to press on,” to her role as the founder of MyAfricanMum. Projects she has worked on in emerging markets and developing countries, and the very roads she has travelled, have transformed her thinking and given her the courage to be braver in her actions.

Her CA(SA) background in turn feeds her SDG passions, because she believes the knowledge and understanding gained by CAs(SA) in their day-to-day operations offers a critical bird's eye view of economies and insights. That is why she feels CAs(SA) should be challenged to translate those deep insights into workable, goal-orientated actions in achieving SDGs.

Explaining how she's achieved just that through MyAfricanMum, Naomi says when they first received a handbag order from the 'Unwrapping Sweet Conversation' collection, she would say to the customer: “This bag is going to draw a lot of attention, are you ready for it?” She adds that it is a real goose-bump moment to receive messages from customers, like: “You won't believe it; I just had someone so desperate to have an Eye Candy handbag they wanted to buy mine from me – here and now!” That is what fuels Naomi's inspiration, along with knowing that every wrapper not going into the bin is better for our planet.



Time for us all to knuckle down and do the dirty work

The rise of CSI projects globally, and those socially responsible consumers, means brands need to go beyond ticking a box and actually make a difference, especially when it comes to pollution management and the green economy. This is often

the hardest aspect to crack when you are working beyond your day job, as it is seen as 'dirty work', but instead of getting bogged down in the detail, Naomi says we should focus on collaborating for collective impact.

The acid test, Naomi says, is whether you would still take part in said project if you could not report on it." Answering this truthfully may change how CSI projects are executed. We need to put 'heart' in our actions, as heart creates change."

That is why she says MyAfricanMum is not dirty work at all. Seeing the stunning end result, and knowing you have helped reduce waste in the process, is so rewarding. "When that passion is wrapped up in an objective that is so significant and life-changing, that time you have 'donated' is not even something you see as time given away, but a surge of power in achieving a key result."

She adds that we need to focus less on competing with one another in South Africa and realise that global markets wait for no one – we need to work together and compete with the world.



Unwrapping the 'working mum' conundrum

Backtracking to the beginning of MyAfricanMum's story, Naomi admits it comes down to circumstances, merged with her OCD of waste: When her family relocated from the small seaside village of Kidd's Beach to PE, she did not want their housekeeper to be unemployed, and so MyAfricanMum was born.

Though they only perfected their workmanship mid-2018, response to their first collection 'Unwrapping Sweet Conversation' was so phenomenal that a further three crafters were added to their team – they work from home to earn extra income, with the 'collecting' team is now effectively the whole community, some of whom had never recycled before. But Naomi's personal favourite recyclers are 'the little people': some dads get into trouble with them for tearing wrappers. These supplies prove the flavour of the month in the resulting handbags, which could be silvery-green Peppermint Crisp-strong or white-and-blue Marie biscuits-designed.

As a stay-at-home mum herself, Naomi says it makes "so much sense" to give this option, which in turn meets the UN's gender equality and decent work and employment SDGs. It is also empowering, as each crafter manages her own time and shows further initiative in teaching others.

The shift from waste to most-wanted

It is also rewarding working on something creative that has a completely different look to the end-result each time, as the team has been told that the handbags are 'works of art'.

Naomi does the basic design, but the wrapper selection is completely left to the crafters, so if you look closely you will see their favourite colours coming through – the bags become their own. They also steer away from custom orders, because special requests for certain wrappers have led the team to spending days trying to find them, when the aim is to use the recycled wrappers at hand.

The labour-intensive production process means it takes roughly two days to make a clutch bag, four days for a medium bag and up to eight days for a very large handbag. The crafters clean, cut and seal the wrappers before starting to build the bags.

Extra 'reuse and upcycle' steps that bring the SDG closer to reality

MyAfricanMum also goes beyond this, sending offcuts and unusable wrapper parts to a recycler who makes Eco Bricks. Calyx Boutique and the GFI Gallery have also recently partnered with MyAfricanMum to make their facilities wrapper recycle drop-off points.

It is a growing area and you too can help transform the world, community by community. According to Naomi, "it's as easy as deciding not to listen to your ego: We're afraid of failing, which hinders us from pursuing our hearts' desires. If each of us could be kinder and gentler to ourselves, our planet and each other, that'll be the start of a ripple effect."

"As a purpose-led profession, it's on all of us to make our own ripple and start transforming the world into a better place, community by community."

Visit the MyAfricaMum Facebook page on www.facebook.com/myafricanmum for more information.

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