

A multi-million rand African skincare business built from Marula oil

Local entrepreneur Portia Mngomezulu, founder of Portia M Skin Solutions, has been awarded Pick n Pay's 2018 Small Supplier of the Year award for her business' exceptional growth performance and job creation. The annual award recognises and rewards the company's top performing small supplier in the country across various categories.



When Mngomezulu gave birth to her son in 2010, she not only embraced motherhood, but also entrepreneurship. After developing stretch marks during her pregnancy, her mother-in-law suggested Marula oil to treat the scarring. The results were so impressive that Mngomezulu wanted to share it with those closest to her. Investing R200 initially, she bought Marula oil directly from rural women in Limpopo, bottled it herself and began selling it as a side-business. The profit she made on each bottle was reinvested into her business.

Brand growth

Fast forward to today, Mngomezulu has created a skincare range of 12 products for both men and women, she's in the process of launching her baby range of five products, and employs 27 full-time staff. In the last 24 months and through Pick n Pay alone, her business has generated over R20 million in sales. This excludes the products she has sold through her online shop, other retailers, and independent pharmacies.

Mngomezulu says she has always known what she wanted for her business. This focus has enabled her to grow her local skincare business into a multi-million rand business that is quickly expanding into Africa. Her products are available in Swaziland, Namibia, and Botswana and she is exploring new markets.

According to Mngomezulu, she knew there was an opportunity to build her own brand when the demand for her bottled oil continued to grow amongst friends and on social media. Over the next three years, she registered her business and expanded her range to include body lotion, face cream, and face wash. With her goal to provide to retailers she also had her products clinically tested and approved. Confident she was ready to supply the retail market, Mngomezulu quit her full-time job as an IT engineer at the end of 2013.



Cracking retail

Over the next year and a half she studied a supplier development programme at GIBS, secured her product on Makro's shelf and toured South Africa with Absa's Women in Business seminar. Given Absa and Pick n Pay's longstanding relationship in supporting local entrepreneurs to develop their business, it was at one of these events in July 2015 that Pick n Pay's Enterprise and Supplier Development (ESD) Programme discovered Portia's products and invited her to meet their health and beauty buyer.

Mngomezulu says that as an entrepreneur, the programme enabled her to grow her brand. Through the programme, micro and small businesses gain access to Pick n Pay's internal corporate experts and are provided with support, business development advice and access to market.

"The programme gave me the opportunity to pitch my products to a buyer and within a week I was told I had secured a spot on their shelves. This was the greatest day of my business life," says Mngomezulu.

Initially her products were placed in 20 corporate and family stores in 2015. Between 2016 and 2017 her sales jumped by nearly 2000% as the store list expanded nationally. She is now in 432 stores and her sales are already up 61% this year.



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Constructive criticism

She adds that her biggest learning from the programme is to trust in the process and to be patient. "A no isn't a no, it only means you have to do it better than before. And if a buyer tells you a year, it might seem far away, but there are many things you can correct during this time. I am grateful I started with only a few stores as this allowed me to manage and learn from the mistakes I made along my retail journey."

Mngomezulu is excited for the future of her business and remains as focused as ever with the aim to increase her footprint in Africa and expand globally. "This is a truly African product with the Marula tree being native to the continent. The world needs to know of the immense healing benefits that Marula oil offers all skin types."

Last year's Pick n Pay Small Supplier of the Year title was awarded to Bernard Nortjie, owner of Dessertworx, the national supplier for Pick n Pay's dessert range. In 2016, co-owners Zoegdie and Bilqees Essa from Comessa Food Service clinched the award for the impressive growth of their Tortilla Affairs range of flatbreads, rotis and naan.

Ongoing support for suppliers

Mishinga Seyuba Kombo, manager of Pick n Pay's Enterprise & Supplier Development Programme, says, "Sustained on-going support across various disciplines is crucial for a small business to succeed. We work closely with our small suppliers to provide them with the opportunity to put their products in front of the customer through our stores.

"The success of the programme is evident from seeing many of our suppliers expand across our network and beyond to service other retailers and sectors. This growth is not only encouraging for their business, but for the communities they serve and the jobs they are able to create."

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