

UWEAL SUCCESS STORIES - Hajjat Nakasujja Bolsters People’s Health with Nature’s Remedies

“You don’t have to have millions of shillings or be an expert in a particular field to start and run a successful enterprise. But you must have courage, determination and focus to achieve your dream.” This is what Hajjat Aisha Nakasujja, the proprietor and Chief Executive Officer of one of the leading herbal medicine, food supplements and cosmetics manufacturing companies in Uganda believes.



NATIONAL MEDALIST

Following a crippling personal setback that left her in complete financial ruin, Hajjat Nakasujja was not sure how she would pick up the pieces and start making a living. As she pondered this challenge, she began the activities that would

eventually lead to the birth of Aloesha Organic Natural Health Products Ltd. The company was born out of a passionate desire first to help her friends find natural remedies for their health problems and second (in that order), to make a financial come-back.

Having been introduced to a variety of medicinal plants by her mother at a young age, Hajjat Nakasujja had always been fascinated by clinical nutrition and herbal medicines. This fascination stimulated her desire to pursue a career and later start a business in this field.

To further polish the skills she had learned from her mother, Hajjat Nakasujja obtained training in nutritional medicine at Plaskett International College, in the United Kingdom. Immediately after qualifying as a psychotherapist in 2008, Hajjat Nakasujja began offering free consultation services and herbal medicinal formulas to members of her family and friends, free of charge. Hajjat Nakasujja soon learned however, that the people she was “helping” did not know how to identify the medicinal plants in her herbal formulas. This compelled her to change her approach. Instead of providing herbal formulas, Hajjat Nakasujja started blending the herbs herself; using herbs picked from her mother’s garden in Wakiso.

For three years, Hajjat Nakasujja created and offered herbal medicinal blends to an increasingly larger group of people with absolutely no commercial gain for herself. She would have continued in this manner indefinitely, had a group of friends not strongly encouraged her to start charging a fee for her services. It was at this point that she realized that she had stumbled upon a concept she could convert into a profitable business.

When Hajjat Nakasujja offered medical consultations and herbal remedies at no charge, there was always a long line of people to see her. Once she started producing herbal remedies

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commercially, the long line disappeared. Selling her first consignments was a struggle. But she did not give up. “Back then, it would take me a month to sell just ten 500 ml bottles of Herbal Cleanser or Revital Health Drink. But with time, appreciation for the products grew and demand began outstripping supply,” Hajjat Nakasujja says.

Products and Services

Established in 2009 and incorporated in 2012, Aloesha Organic Natural Health Products Ltd. produces 113 natural health products under the Aloesha brand, in three categories – cosmetics and skin care products (13 products) , nutritional food supplements / immune boosters (3 products) and herbal medicines / pharmaceutical products (97 products). The company’s research team invests a large amount of time on product development, especially under the herbal medicines / pharmaceutical products line. The unit price for an item ranges between Uganda shillings 17,000 to 80,000, depending on the product.

Aloesha Organic also offers a range of services including research in health and herbal medicine, dental services, body and foot massage, counseling services, community outreach workshops on medicinal plants and clinical diagnosis. Hajjat Nakasujja also runs a weekly radio show on medicinal plants.



Aloesha Organic products and services are indeed in high demand as is evidenced by the long queues of people waiting to see Hajjat Nakasujja at the company’s Bombo Road branch in Kampala. Aloesha Organic registers over 7,500 office visits a month. In keeping with Hajjat Naksujja’s desire to serve her community, there is no charge for an office visit. The company makes it money from the sale of their products.

Raw Materials

Aloesha Organic uses a variety of organic herbs, essential oils, fruits and vegetables to produce the entire line of Aloesha products. The raw materials are obtained from two

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sources. Organic fruits including pineapples, apples, bananas, passion fruit, papaya, avocados, ginger and other medicinal plants are grown on the Aloesha Organic Farm in Bombo, North of Kampala. To supplement the supply of raw materials from the organic farm, Hajjat Nakasujja trained six groups of out growers and small holder farmers in six districts of Uganda to grow quality, organic, medicinal herbs. The out growers and farmers are based in Arua, Bombo, Masaka, Mbale, Nebbi and Wakiso. Of the 80 out-growers and small holder farmers that Aloesha Organic works with, 80 percent are women.

Getting Started

From an initial investment of Hajjat Nakasujja's time, herbs picked from her mother's garden and Uganda shillings 500,000 used to purchase utensils, mixing bowls and a few one litre jerry-cans for the blended herbal liquids, the business has grown into a billion shilling venture. Aloesha Organic's annual turnover was estimated at Uganda shillings 1.8 billion as of December 2016.

Exports

In 2013, Aloesha Organic began selling products to customers outside Uganda. Customers in the East African Community, the United Kingdom, the United States and China order products by e-mail and receive small shipments delivered by courier. Some of these customers make regular orders and have earned the name "permanent customers." Most of them learned of Aloesha Organic through the company website or by word of mouth. Some pharmacies in Boston, USA have expressed an interest in carrying Aloesha Organic products but, will only be able to do so after the products they are interested in have received standards certification. In recognition of the value that standards certification will add to their products, Aloesha Organic has begun the certification process.

Challenges

High commercial lending rates: Like any other business, Hajjat Nakasujja feels the pinch of the high cost of doing business caused by high commercial bank lending rates, which she says has constrained faster business expansion. The company currently has only two clinics located on Bombo Road, Kampala and on Edward Avenue in Masaka. The clinics double as product distribution points.

Semi-manual production processes result in low production capacity. For example, the company can only produce 200 bars of 250 gram soap a day, which are insufficient to meet demand. The cost of mechanization is still out of Aloesha Organic's reach, especially because of the high commercial lending rates.

Packaging and labels: Although the company has found packaging and label solutions that are good enough to use today, Hajjat Nakasujja hopes to improve both packaging and labeling materials. However, there are limited options in Uganda and none are cost effective.

Achievements

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Certification: One of Aloesha Organic's proudest achievements is the successful completion of required certification processes. Aloesha Organic sought certification from two different agencies in Uganda. Cosmetics and skin care products are certified by the Uganda National Bureau of Standards (UNBS). In December 2016, seven Aloesha Organic products qualified for the UNBS Q-mark which is awarded to products that meet the safety, health and quality standards for export. Aloesha Organic has also been certified by the National Drug Authority (NDA), which does not have a standard for pharmaceuticals and supplements but instead, certifies the suitability of premises.

The standards certification journey is not an easy one. The price of a product standard ranges from Uganda shillings 20,000 to 50,000, depending on the number of pages it contains. In addition to purchasing product standards, one must also subject one's products to product testing which ensures that the products meet the required standard. Each product undergoes three tests. Product tests cost anywhere from Uganda shillings 300,000 to 700,000 depending on the nature of the product. Fortunately for Aloesha Organic, after they purchased over seven standards from UNBS, they received a grant from the Uganda Ministry of Trade, Industry and Cooperatives to cover the cost of product testing. The grant was offered under the TradeMark East Africa funded Quality Infrastructure and Standards Programme (QUISP). Without the grant, Aloesha Organic would have made much slower progress towards standards certification.

According to Hajjat Nakasujja, UNBS and NDA certification will widen their domestic distribution channels and allow Aloesha Organic to explore regional and international markets. "This will all propel us to a higher level," she says. "I look forward to making our products more accessible, by distributing them to pharmacies and supermarkets across the country. It is such an inconvenience for some of our customers to have to travel long distances to obtain our products. With wider distribution, our sales are bound to grow."

Although seemingly costly, certification gives the product a positive image in both domestic and international markets, safeguards the image of the manufacturer, protects the brand against unfair competition from inferior products and assures the customer that the product is suitable for their use.

Employment: Hajjat Nakasujja started out alone in 2009. Today, Aloesha Organic employs 54 permanent members of staff and up to 200 casual labourers, depending on the season. Aloesha Organic has distinguished itself as a company that experiences low staff turnover. This is attributed to the manner in which Hajjat Nakasujja treats her employees. She views them as colleagues and invests several hours in cross training them in the different departments at Aloesha. Her employees feel treasured and in return, reward her with their loyalty. On the rare occasion when a fully trained permanent employee chooses to leave, they leave with her blessing.

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National Recognition: Aloesha Organic's path has been decorated with numerous awards. Among them are the Uganda Investment Authority's Investor of the Year award in the Small and Medium Enterprise category (2016), a presidential medal recognizing Hajjat Nakasujja as one of Uganda's top women achievers and entrepreneurs (2016), the Uganda Women Entrepreneurs Association Ltd. (UWEAL) Regional Entrepreneur Award 2016, Central Region and the Regional Winner in the Chemical, Pharmaceutical and Petrochemical Sector by CEO Global Africa's most Influential Women in Business and Government (2016).

Lessons Learned



Join a network: After joining UWEAL and interacting with other women entrepreneurs from a variety of fields, Hajjat Nakasujja soon learned how little she really knew. Networking with UWEAL members became an enjoyable opportunity to learn, to test new business ideas and to build her customer base.

Set goals and pursue them: Once Hajjat Nakasujja committed herself to turning what felt like a hobby and something nice to do for friends and family into a business, nothing would deter her. "With determination, focus and hard work, women can excel at any business, even those that were once believed to be the preserve of men," she says.

If you are going to do something, do it well: Hajjat Nakasujja has always sought to provide a quality product. It is no wonder therefore, that Aloesha Organic products are able to meet UNBS standards certification requirements upon their first attempt through the process.

The Future

Hajjati Nakasujja's eyes twinkle as she says "I have set my sights on becoming the leading conscientious herbal solutions provider in Uganda. Our guiding philosophy will always remain the fostering of growth while enhancing peoples' lives."