

Never give up on chasing your dreams

Starting a business with a pen and a piece of paper takes guts and self-belief. Opening a furniture manufacturing and upholstery business in an empty warehouse without a nail- or staple gun, borders on the ludicrous. But, if you are a die-hard entrepreneur with an MBA degree against your name, it is just another day in the life of Amet Furnishings Managing Director, Ketshegofetse Mathibela.

As a self-funded business, Amet Furnishings quickly had to grow into a one-stop-shop providing most interior decorating and design elements, including curtaining, refurbishment, and multi-purpose furnishings. According to Mathibela, the challenges she experienced since the business started in 2018, are too numerous to count. But she is a go-getter with a never say die attitude. “I believe that agility is a core element of a business and by embracing change, we have a much better chance to stay in business,” says Mathibela.

To add to the challenges, the furnishing industry is not exactly known for the multitude of women fighting for market share. “I suppose it is a bit of a boys’ club, with most of the women filling administrative positions,” she says. “However, it is up to strong female leaders to take the lead and show the young women entrepreneurs it is possible to be a successful owner in the furnishing industry.” According to Mathibela, one of the possible reasons why women do not pursue a career in the furniture industry is because the job is extremely time consuming, and women need a strong family support structure to be able to succeed.

“During my studies, I did a case study for a furnishing company in need of a strategy and business process engineering, which is really how I got interested in this industry. At the same time, it was possible to point out opportunities and weaknesses, which I could implement in my own business,” she reckons.

The announcement of the national lockdown came as a shock to her, as the company had just invested into two showrooms to create more awareness for its products. “I have to admit, 2019 was not that great, so I was very optimistic when we were about to open the showrooms. And then lockdown just brought everything crashing down, the company’s investment was at risk of going down the drain,” says Mathibela.

The first week of lockdown, Mathibela was sitting at home reading an article about the World Health Organisation, and its prediction of an expected shortage of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and facemasks.

“While I was reading this, my mind went into overdrive,” says Mathibela. “I was thinking about the rolls and rolls of fabric I have at the workshop. So, I phoned all our seamstresses to assess how many of them have sewing machines at home, extending the question to their friends and family members.”

According to her, she then called SAFI to ask for help as the company was in trouble. “I knew SAFI were in the thick of things in terms of the Furniture Industry Masterplan (FIMP), the Public Procurement Bill and engaging with government.”

While speaking to SAFI, she realised that importing surgical masks from China, or anywhere else, will not be possible. The next morning, she applied for an essential services licence to be able to go to her factory and take stock of the different fabric patterns.

“I love business process engineering, so I used these skills to find a solution. It was during this time that Government asked the public to start wearing masks, so I designed a template pattern, and I was lucky as we had some African prints in stock!” says Mathibela.

Owing to the stage five lockdown they stopped manufacturing furniture, forcing her to pivot the workshop in the opposite direction. “Some of the employees had their own sewing machines at homes, so we started bringing the material to their homes and at the same time collecting the finished products while doing quality checks.”

Thinking back to that first month, she now understands how her formal training and education kicked in to transform the change. “I looked at my resources, understood the need for speed and flexibility from my employees as well as our need to be innovative,” says Mathibela.

The outcome of this is astounding. Where so many businesses were looking at retrenchments and other cost-cutting measures, the company was able to supply temporary employment to ten more seamstresses to satisfy the demand for face masks.

With the lockdown relaxed to stage three, Amet Furnishings could return to designing and manufacturing home and office furniture. “I am now lucky to be able to run two businesses, albeit with limited resources,” she says.

But even by making a difference in the lives of her employees and those who use her face masks, she is very frustrated. “I have applied for every single funding relief and funding opportunity out there. Amet Furnishings have not been approved to receive any funding so far, even though we meet all the requirements for relief.”

But this does not mean Ketshegofetse Mathibela is lying down just yet. “I will continue to employ and empower women in my business. I will continue to keep busy and make a difference in the furniture and health industries.”

- Amet Furnishings is based in Wynberg, Sandton. More about their products can be found at www.ametfurnishings.co.za or info@ametfurnishings.co.za.