

Uganda's honey queen talks Bee Natural

Head of Bee Natural Uganda, Maria Odido, recently gained international recognition when she was awarded the 2010 Project Incubator Award for her innovative and sustainable project. Having set herself some important goals, Odido has had to experience success and then failure before firmly establishing herself as Uganda's honey queen.



Tell us about Bee Natural Uganda - when did it start and what was your vision?

Odido: *Bee Natural Uganda was set up in 2008 after my initial company Bee Natural Products Ltd went into receivership. The vision remains the same as the first company I set up: to work with rural producers so that together we produce a world class product and brand that comes from our local rural areas that we can all be proud of.*

Why did you attend the Agribusiness Forum 2010?

Odido: *I received, quite by chance, an email from EMRC 10 days before the conference inviting me to attend as a conference participant. On reading the document, I realised there was also an Incubator Award. I convinced my company that we should participate in the award competition, even if we did not win. The idea was to put our company out there.*

What did you hope to receive from the forum?

Odido: *The best I had hoped for was to introduce my company to a wider audience. I had made enormous strides in the previous company which had actually grown too fast. My company had been the buzz of the agriculture and trade sectors. Then the bottom fell out on us and we went down all the way. When we restarted, I had promised myself that I would be quiet and focus on business growth.*

What inspired you to enter the Project Incubator Award?

Odido: *I read about the other companies that had entered the awards and realised that they were mostly SMEs and therefore we would not be out of our depth.*

I felt that opening our company to this competition would market our company in the right forum. That hopefully we would meet an equity investor or some honey company that would want to invest in us to increase our production with the goal to start exporting to other countries beyond the East African region after fully exploiting this region.

We were setting up a new product line - jams and marmalades. I was hoping to meet consultants who could advise us on this new project in terms of financial viability and production possibilities. I could not understand why these two products are monopolised by Zesta in Kenya when Uganda has such an abundance of fruit. So, participating in the conference and particularly in the award, I believed I could meet professionals from whom I could gain some knowledge and insight into this.

How did you feel when you won the prize?

Odido: *Goodness! It was completely unexpected! I had listened to the presentations of the other competitors and suddenly I felt really small! I felt I had not done as much as they had. I had nearly gone bankrupt. I'd had to pull myself up by my shoe strings and go back into the same business that nearly destroyed me, and suddenly I was winning a prize for it! It was incredible! I had never won a cash prize before. I thought, 'who are these guys who look beyond the*

visible?' I will always be thankful to EMRC-Rabobank for that recognition. Never had I expected that I would be holding the first prize. Believe me.

How did this victory help Bee Natural as a business? How was the prize invested?

Odido: We received congratulatory messages from across Africa and Europe. We still hope that we will have consultants who can help us in improving and applying newer technology into our business.

We reviewed our new products and realised that we were not going to be wise to invest this money in the jams and marmalades that were still in the incubator stage. Yet we were so much more advanced in our current bee business. After discussions with my staff, we agreed that the prize money would be put to better use if we re-equipped our Queen Rearing yard. This way, we are able to increase our income through selling of colonies to our beekeepers. This would improve and shorten production periods for our producers therefore bringing in income faster and improving their investments in this enterprise, especially for those who took loans to buy hives. Along with our Queen Rearing Yard, we have also introduced new bee products such as packaged comb honey - a novelty in East Africa, and we expect to start packing creamed honey later this year.

We have also changed our packaging from plastic pots to glass jars. We had carried out a marketing study early last year where our honey obtained first place in product quality and almost bottom place in packaging. It had become important that we meet our consumer demands.

What other developments have taken place in your business since the Agribusiness Forum 2010? How have the contacts made during the forum added value to your business? And how has the Project incubator Award elevated your business?

Odido: We are taken more seriously now. An evaluation of our activities was carried out recently by Kilimo Trust, an organisation that funds our producers to improve their production. Of the several companies in which they are involved countrywide, we were one of the four selected for further development. Unfortunately, during the Agribusiness forum, we did not go beyond discussions with the contact companies. Perhaps because at the time, I was unable to have meaningful discussions as some days I could not attend. I had contracted malaria and could not attend all the days. However, we are growing at the right pace at the moment.

Who should attend the EMRC AgriBusiness Forum 2011?

Odido: There are many companies that do very innovative things in very small ways in our countries. They struggle, because they are too small for big financial institutions to take interest and the governments do not support them in anyway. I nearly lost everything because I had invested in the rural producer. This is essentially a government responsibility, but if I wanted the product then I had to do something about getting it produced. I paid a very heavy price for that. There are many of these stories across Africa. Those are people that need to be recognised and invested in.

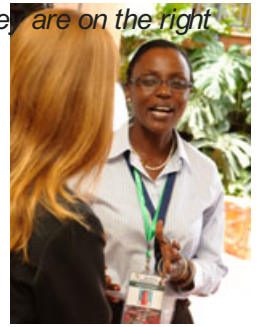
Governments should attend so that together we can discuss how to achieve a practical role for everyone in order to develop agriculture in our countries. Banks and financial institutions - they do not understand the value of designing suitable financing for this sector, especially in Uganda. Financial institutions are too rigid and do not understand working with such companies for a win-win position. If this could be achieved, we would have so many more local investors, who can play long-term roles in agricultural economic development.

Large companies with whom small companies can discuss and learn from in order to understand how to overcome growth hurdles - this could also lead to possible partnerships where franchising can be discussed.

Why should people enter the Project Incubator Award?

Odido: In entering the Project Incubator Award, a company/person can get recognition for their activities and can also

measure themselves against other participants and meet with people and organisations, to see if they are on the right path or not. To be selected to present your company to this great audience, whether one wins or not, gives a company leverage and recognition.



How should people that enter the Project Incubator Award competition prepare their presentations? Any tips to a good presentation?

Odido: A PowerPoint seems to be the most effective. However, while data and information is obviously crucial to show what achievements have been made, I think that it is also important that participants demonstrate their knowledge and commitment to the business they do. I say this because in my business there was no other way. Many of us, in the situation that I found myself, would have walked away to do something easier. Incubation is not easy. It may be important to demonstrate the work that goes into the incubation, the success realised and the challenges faced. In that, EMRC can get a better perspective into how well the award money will be utilised, and follow up will be easier and more effective.

What is the key to creating a sustainable business project in your community in Africa?

Odido: I am a local investor. For that reason a sustainable business project for me is of high importance. Africa rightly relies on foreign direct investments. However, our role as local investors is even more important. We understand our communities better, are more in touch with their realities and are able to understand their intricacies. In understanding a community it is easier to work with them and to gain success not just for the community but for the company as well, and longer term sustainable growth for our economies in Africa.

Interview conducted by [EMRC](#)

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