



Perseverance and resilience: a tale of two entrepreneurs

King's Manufactures Holdings Pty Ltd is a signage company in Elandspoor, Pretoria, that offers services across the entire signage works spectrum – from manufacturing and installation to maintenance and refurbishment of light boxes, 3D signage, 3D illuminated letters, reception signs and others. The company delivers quality signage solutions with high impact, tailored to clients' needs. A serious commitment to quality and customer satisfaction has secured corporate clients, such as Land Rover and City Lodge.

Meet Phil Mohlalowa and Selby Nkosi, owners of King's Manufactures Holdings Pty Ltd:



“A business with no sign is a sign of no business”

Entrepreneurs unite

Phil Mohlalowa and Selby Nkosi grew up in Mamelodi outside Pretoria. Their paths first crossed in the music industry while both were fully employed elsewhere – Phil at a government department and Selby in the signage sector. Engaging in their mutual passion for music, they discovered they shared a flair for entrepreneurship and were inspired to launch a record label. In 2016, they registered their first business, a music production company.

In time, it became clear that running the company required a full-time commitment, so Phil opted to resign in 2017 with Selby to join him once the business was financially stable. To help fund the company they discussed diversifying, and an events business seemed the ideal, complementary enterprise.

The pair rented a venue in Sinoville with intention to buy it once the business had grown. From the beginning, it seemed their events company would become a huge success. They were hosting private functions for corporates and government departments, weddings, school functions, funerals – every kind of event. By 2019, they had hosted as many as 7 000 people at their venue, and clients had to secure bookings far in advance. Their biggest event for a government department saw them hire 750 staff members just for one day. They even got TV exposure when a wedding they hosted was featured on the show My Perfect Wedding. This elevated the profile of the business and led to a flood of inquiries and bookings.

Life was good – they were debt-free, able to pay the rent and staff overheads easily, and Selby was looking forward to resigning. Focused on growth, they felt that diversification worked well for them and decided to launch another venture.

They examined their individual strengths and thought it would be a good idea to tap into Selby's expertise in the signage industry. He'd already been doing signage design and installation for the events company and people had often asked about the signage and who had been hired for it. Kings Manufactures Holdings (PTY) LTD was registered in 2019.

A devastating blow

Selby and Phil were convinced that due to the positive trajectory of their events

company, 2020 would be their break-even year, and that they could invest some of their profits into the new signage business. Then the pandemic hit, destroying countless businesses and livelihoods, including their events business. "Suddenly, we were faced with having to pay back all our clients who had booked in advance," explains Selby. "This was a major loss, and our dreams of success were shattered. It also caused uncertainty and stress around our new business, which had already started operating."

In light of this, they had to make some difficult sacrifices and lifestyle changes. Phil explains: "Our families were already struggling, we could not afford the lifestyles we'd had before, and we had to relinquish our cars to avoid bad credit scores." Phil moved out of his home, closer to the business, and Selby who had resigned in December 2019 was contemplating returning to work.

A lifeline came from Selby's former company, which contracted Kings Manufactures for signage work. At the time they did not have a workshop; they were operating from Selby's garage in Danville, and the contract meant they had to outsource most of the work. This set the tone for other contracts that came in.

"We lost almost 35% of our profit to the companies we were outsourcing work to, and we survived like this for almost two years," explains Phil. "But we refused to give up on a business we believed in, even when things seemed impossible. Selby's passion motivated me to keep on believing. When the odds were stacked against us, he'd simply say: 'Bro, let's do this thing!'"

Their struggles brought them closer, and they became more than just business partners; they cared deeply about one another's welfare. This brotherly

connection kept them going through the most difficult times and they tackled everything together. "I was 'my brother's keeper' to Phil, and he was the same to me," explains Selby.

More challenges

Some work trickled in for refurbishments or maintenance and while a few companies gave them a chance, others would not take the risk of using a small business. Clients would negotiate their prices down and under tremendous pressure, they would accept, just to get by. They also tried to secure loans but were considered high risk as their business had just launched. Selby explains that the signage industry tends to be complex and while the returns on investment can be lucrative, people are averse to investing in such a business.

Kings Manufactures had become dependent on cold calling, but without cars, Selby and Phil were forced to walk long distances. They tell the story how they once walked 15km to meet with a prospective client only to find out the client had cancelled. With no money, they had to walk back 15km to get home.

During this time, they employed men from the neighbourhood and Selby trained them up. In this way, they also wanted to help the unemployed, as drug abuse was rife among them. However, if a large project came in, they were forced to hire skilled labour, which impacted their profitability.

The turning point

Phil and Selby knew they were limiting their growth despite the potential of their business. They also lacked vital equipment necessary for the work, which meant that they had to regularly outsource some of the production process. Operating from a small space decreased their appeal as a

professional service provider, especially with potential corporate clients. Times were tough, and every day they had to keep reminding themselves how badly they wanted this business to work, and that they would do whatever it took to keep it. They just needed a breakthrough.

And that breakthrough came when a City Lodge manager contacted them for hotel signage repairs, after having found Kings Manufactures on Google. They were subcontracted to work at City Lodge and Town Lodge, providing Selby and Phil with an opportunity to prove themselves. “We delivered our best service and made an impression, which led to the City Lodge manager recommending that we apply for the SATSA Tourism Business Incubation programme. City Lodge was also prepared to sponsor us,” says Phil. “More than 30 companies applied, and we were told only few would be selected, so it seemed far-fetched that we would be among them.”

But Kings Manufactures was successful, and their new journey began.

A holistic approach

The SATSA Tourism Business Incubation programme, in partnership with Sigma International, helps small businesses to upskill, grow and thrive with a focus on business development, operational support and business linkages. As an accelerator model, it also exposes small companies to a funding network.

Kings Manufactures was identified as an emerging business and under the enterprise development instrument, it was entered into an “incubation period” of October 2022 to September 2023, with City Lodge providing the funding. Sigma International conducted a detailed business diagnostics and developed a roadmap for Kings Manufactures’ recovery and growth.

Sigma business mentors were then assigned to coach Phil and Selby in business know-how from business plans and marketing collateral development to financial management skills. They were also provided with much-needed equipment and tools.

A website is a vital marketing tool for any business, and the incubator programme acknowledges the prohibitive costs for small businesses by offering a solution. Kings Manufactures now has a professional website to showcase their products and services.

“Even though we’d been running businesses for some time, we never had a deep understanding of the skills needed to manage a business professionally. It was just a question of survival for us and chasing profits, so this programme has really opened our eyes,” Selby says.

“The support, mentoring and financial management coaching we’ve received has been phenomenal,” adds Phil. “We interact regularly with our Sigma International mentor, and we’ve been exposed to motivational speakers and webinars. We’ve also improved from one of our biggest issues, which was all the outsourcing we had to do.”

When asked about their proudest moment on their journey, they agree that it was being able to attend the Africa's Travel Indaba for the first time and having the opportunity to network and gain new clients. “SATSA sponsored us and made this possible. It was such a valuable event and after such a long time of hustling, it really uplifted us,” Phil says. “We learnt about marketing avenues we would not have thought of ourselves, and there were all these businesses sharing their experiences. It was an eye-opener as we had never attended such an event before.”

Asked about their advice to anyone

starting out on their entrepreneurial journey, Selby says planning is paramount. This includes having money saved to buy resources and equipment and drawing up a business plan and a marketing strategy. It is also important to seek out mentorship. He cautions against taking risks such as resigning from a job until you are certain you can sustain your lifestyle and that of your family.

Secondly, he advises against depending on friends or family to come to the rescue if things go badly or depending on your pension fund. He explains that they were lucky to receive Sassa grants that kept them from complete collapse until SATSA came along but this is not the norm. "If SATSA had not come into our lives at that point, Phil and I and our financial manager would never have made it," Selby admits. He adds that choosing the right business partner is crucial. "A business partnership is like a marriage. You need someone who will be there for you whether you're succeeding or failing."

Phil agrees with Selby about planning properly, adding that you need to be clear on the kind of business you want. He points out that many people tend to focus on making a profit. "But having your own business is about more than that. It's about growing, maturing and learning about the many aspects of running a business. We are grateful that SATSA gave our business that much-needed growth."

Building a legacy

In terms of hopes and dreams for the future, Phil explains that his biggest wish is to build a legacy for their children and families. He has two daughters and a son and Selby has three boys. "It's not just about building an empire," he is quick to point out. "The struggle we experienced is something we never want to see our children or family members having to go through. That's why we never gave up; we

were not going to fail them, and we want them to learn from our journey."

Selby says he would like to share the experience he has gained in manufacturing since 1994 and one day employ people in need. "I don't want to see anyone struggling or dealing with poverty and so, I'd like to take people on board and train them, especially women. The time has come for women to be empowered, especially in the manufacturing industry. I'd love to add value in this way and see women being empowered by Kings Manufactures." His vision is for the company to be the role model for women empowerment in the industry.

Phil and Selby say they are excited about the future of Kings Manufactures and feel confident that they will be equipped for success after the programme ends. "Many businesses in our townships, small businesses, can benefit so much from this programme as we have. We highly recommend it," concludes Phil.