



Lavan Gopaul talks to businessman Akhona Mahlati, who believes everything and anything is possible

Adv Lavan Gopaul
Director: Merchant Afrika
Tel: 083 716 5916
gopaul@merchantst.com
www.merchanafrika.com

How did you get interested in this industry and when did you start in business?

I started working for British American Tobacco in Stellenbosch, Cape Town as a marketing management trainee. Later I was brand manager at Capitec Bank during the transition from a micro lender to a competitive retail bank. I moved to Joburg with Diners Club International. I started a business with a partner in my last year there which prompted me to drop everything and move to Durban. Three years later, the business no longer operated.

When did you first achieve success?

The day I handed in my resignation letter and left Joburg to experience self-employment as a full-time business operator."

Why did you set up your business?

I needed to be independent and make a meaningful difference in people's lives, as well as contribute to the socio-economic landscape.

And to be the type of father and partner I wanted to be, I needed a flexible environment. I believe true financial emancipation can be achieved only when you're a business owner.

What problems or challenges consume you daily?

The negative connotations directed at and associated with black business people. The lack of professionalism and time from people in respected capacities and institutions. The slow pace at which people make decisions in Durban. Business in Durban is mainly done through relationships – a case of "because I know you or your family" and rarely because of the value one provides.

How do you choose staff?

Attitude and aspiration. I love big dreamers and those who believe anything and everything is possible, people who are confident and still have a sense of humility.

What benefits do you have over competitors?

Customer-centricity – we can do anything and everything, and our customers will always be our reason for being.

What mistakes have you made?
Dropping my advancing career and trusting a business partner



who was not fully committed.

What is the greatest thing you've learnt in business?

To keep it simple and not over-complicate things. You can only do good business with good people – remove yourself from negative associations and unbecoming practices.

What is the most important advice you have for young business people?

Never be penny wise and pound foolish. Think of the bigger picture where you can maximise lifetime value. Be innovative in your thinking and build good relationships.

If you could change something in business, what would it be?

To have direct access to many more decision-makers and those with veto power.

What type of clients do you have?

All sorts – various industries, sizes and cultures.

How did you find or grow your client book?

By working on relationships and networks, and through endless nights of writing and presenting proposals.
What features or expansion are you planning?
To start doing business on

the rest of the continent.

What motivates you?

Delighting people and being at peace with myself. Financial freedom and family comfort follow closely.

To what do you attribute your success?

Inner strength, challenging myself and being an eternal optimist. I try to surround myself with wise and great people.

How do you interact with people with whom you have competed or crossed swords?

By being myself, expressing how I feel and forgiving them. "That doesn't mean I'll ever trust them or enjoy a cordial relationship with them again though."

What hurdles or obstacles have you overcome?

Losing all my money and then getting depressed. Many failed business and personal relationships that are emotionally and physically draining.

What would previous teachers, co-workers or managers say about you?

He's confident in himself and will be the president of the country in a few years. We're not surprised at his success.
Where do you see yourself in

the near or distant future?

Mentoring numerous business leaders all over Africa and being part of the seeds planted in their route to success.

What hours do you work?

Generally 7.30am to 6pm, sometimes later if and when required and when I'm lecturing.

What did you want to be when you were growing up?

A lawyer, when I was in primary school, and later a chartered accountant. In my tertiary years, I wanted to be a marketer and became one. When I encountered the school of life, I decided to become an entrepreneur and a business leader.

What was your favourite toy as a child?

My BMW bicycle and my mini-super cars.

What was the worst class you had at school or university?

Business information systems.

What other industries are you looking to venture into or interest you?

Education, tourism, and food and beverages.

If you could pick only one industry or stock in which to invest, what would you pick and why?

BUSINESS FACTS

Name of business: Ewe Sana Marketing & Communications, and Business Fit.
Nature of business and sector: Marketing, communications and public relations, and entrepreneurship development.
Number of staff: Ewe Sana: Three full-time with many casuals, Business Fit: Four directors and 12 associates.
Business operations: Countrywide.
Years in operation: Ewe Sana 5, Business Fit 3.
Business positions/directorships: Director of Ewe Sana, Business Fit, Past deputy chairman, Comensa KZN.
Leadership: Provincial governor, Abahlali World, Professional Network (past), Community/cultural
Chairman of Ukukhanya Development Trust (NPO), Committee member of the Durban Entrepreneurs Club.
Entrepreneurship and business management lecturer, Varsity College Durban North.
Education: B Com (KZN), strategic marketing management certificate (UCT), numerous short courses and programmes.
Awards: Economics prize in matric, Headmaster's award.

AKHONA MAHLATI

Favourite food? Seafood platter.
Favourite sport, and what do you do in your leisure time? Cricket and rugby. I spend leisure time with family and friends, and I enjoy good wine.
Favourite vehicle? Bentley GT.
Favourite music? Christopher Dlugan's Music Revival.
Best holiday destination? Umngazi, just outside Port St Johns.
Favourite colour? Navy blue.
What you're reading and who is your favourite author? Business and entrepreneur magazines, Malcolm Gladwell.

Unfortunately, I can't pick one. The industries are education or health care – medical technology or drugs – because people will always want better education and health facilities.

In terms of stocks, Aspen Pharmacare and AdvTech – they have a history of consistent, strong growth with a balanced bouquet of strong brands and products that appeal to both under-developed and sophisticated markets. Through innovation they are able to keep ahead of the masses.

In your opinion, who is the most influential South African business or political leader?

The ordinary man in the street, the leader with no name. They determine who becomes influential and how far their influence spreads, as well the extent.

What do you hope to accomplish with your wealth or business?

I hope to open doors that will lead to me enjoying my heart's deepest desires. I want to be among those who add value in achieving the greater social and economic good for the country.
I want to help remove the socio-economic imbalances, the fear and inferiority complexes that plague our people when we stand against the rest of the world.