



'Do a Thing' or Do the Right Thing?

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We are all familiar with the "do a thing" approach to starting a business in Jamaica: someone with an entrepreneurial spirit has a closely guarded business idea, they line up resources, hire-up staff, and then what?

Then they hope for the best. Too many business ventures are launched and fail in Jamaica because no market research was done to determine whether anyone actually wanted to buy the product or service being offered. Anyone who cares about building a competitive business or economy should look to Sandra Samuels, CEO of Kingston-based Totally Male, for a timely lesson on how business success comes from first knowing and then delivering what your customers want.



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In 1994, Sandra Samuels was a flight attendant at a beleaguered Air Jamaica when she saw the writing on the wall and began to map out a new career plan. In November of that same year, she launched Totally Male, a one-of-a-kind spa offering professional men a "full aesthetic upgrading experience", ranging from nail care and barbering to etiquette lessons and clothing make-overs. "I've always had a passion for fashion and grooming so I saw this as an opportunity to build a business around something I love," commented Samuels.

Samuels' entrepreneurial spirit is inspiring but not necessarily unique. What is noteworthy is how her focus on customers' needs drove her every move. Samuels initially had a hunch that professional males in Jamaica had very few choices when it came to clothing stores or personal grooming services. Rather than jump in feet first on the basis of a hunch, however, she tested her hypothesis within her network of contacts and researched the would-be competition. Samuels wanted to be sure her passion for this type of business was aligned with the needs of the market. "It's a lot easier to copy another business model, but tailoring your product offering requires a lot more focus on the needs of the customer you're targeting," she said.

Based on her research, she chose to target a very specific segment of the market: Jamaican professional males, primarily in the 35 to 45-year-old demographic, in the Kingston area. Samuels developed a suite of products and services tailored to their specific needs. It was these needs that informed the layout of her spa and the training of her staff. This demand-driven approach to her business is all the more impressive given that Samuels had to identify needs that her customers were not very good at articulating. How many men do you know who would readily admit to enjoying a good pedicure?

Totally Male's focus on meeting defined customer needs has propelled the company to great success. Since its inception, the company has grown from two to twelve employees, and has built a client base of over 2,300 customers. The company has outgrown its initial location and recently moved to a much larger home in New Kingston's central business district. To track the evolution of her clients' needs, Totally Male built a database with details on all of its 2,300 clients, with information on everything from their favourite beverage to their purchasing preferences. On the basis of these data, Totally Male has added new products and dropped others. In effect, Samuels is having an on-going discussion with her clients - and she is the one doing the listening.

Why is Totally Male such an important case study for Jamaica in general? Because a focus on customer needs is more important now than ever before. In today's global marketplace, consumers have an abundance of choice. Little things make the difference in what a consumer chooses to purchase. This is true even with the most basic of products like agricultural goods. I often cite the example of salmon, where colour means money. Market research has shown that consumers believe darker shades of salmon indicate higher quality and better taste. Salmon that is just a shade too dark or too light means a lost sale. As such, a Swiss company developed a series of dietary supplements for farm-raised salmon that allows farmers to choose the exact shade of pink they desire from a fan deck, essentially a paint swathe, called the "SalmoFan". Farmers need only select the shade they want from the fan, then add the corresponding chemicals to their feedstock to produce whatever colour the market demands.

Given the importance of listening to customers, perhaps it's not surprising that as a woman Samuels has excelled in the business world. I've been told by my wife on numerous occasions that listening skills are not the forte of most men. This is a lesson that all business people need to be reminded of. It's too easy to become inward-focused with all the talk of IMF bail-outs, falling exchange rates, and rising interest rates. Yes these things matter, but Samuels will be the first to tell you that the success or failure of a business ultimately depends on its ability to look outward to the market and offer something that someone wants to buy. Let's hope Samuels' fellow entrepreneurs are listening.

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