OVERCOMING POVERTY THROUGH CRAFT IN SOUTH AFRICA

Every day, thousands of women and men create beautiful craftwork using their inherent creativity and the traditional knowledge passed down through generations to hand make items that are often unique to the southern African region. But however beautiful their work is, they still experience challenges like any other business.

Craft products may be purely aesthetic or decorative such as a beaded necklace, or completely practical such as a beer strainer or beaded pens. Sometimes crafters make items for themselves and their friends, but most craft is made to sell either to the local market or to the tourist trade, or is destined for export. However, many crafters make very little money for their efforts, while a few have made fortunes conquering international markets.

Crafters face many challenges, for example, in increasing earnings from their trade. One option to increase earnings is to make small changes like finding better sources of raw materials. From time to time crafters have to learn more about seasonal colour trends or make large changes such as establishing formal businesses and developing the communication skills required to interact with buyers in other parts of the world.

Identifying the target market has become one of the biggest challenges crafters face, according to Mr. Duncan Hay of the University of KwaZulu-Natal. “Many crafters make products and then try to sell them without thinking carefully about who might actually buy these products”, says Hay. “For example, many crafters may be targeting traditional weddings that require a range of traditional craft products, while others may be targeting international tourists who visit their areas. The needs of these markets will be different and will impact on the product that is produced.”

Crafters from Inina Craft Agency in Eshowe, KwaZulu-Natal, have learnt a lot from running their business while serving both local and international customers. While working with Inina Craft Agency for many years, Hay and colleagues have taught and then gone on to document many craft-related success and challenges in two books, Bankable Craft: Putting Money in People’s Pockets and The Business of Craft and Crafting the Business: Strategies for Success in the Rural Craft Sector (both are available online as a free resource). One such lesson is success is to make products unique in a way that other crafters cannot easily copy.

As consumers are becoming increasingly concerned about sustainable use of raw materials, crafters now need to communicate their fair trade and sustainability policies to gain competitive advantage. Some of the basic principles of the business are often hard to understand and master as most crafters live traditional lifestyles in rural areas but sell products to people who live western lifestyles in urban areas.

Hay maintains that being able to communicate with clients is vital to both sustainability and growth of any business. Crafters need to tell their local and international clients about their products and how much they cost. Many crafters in South Africa did not have the opportunity to receive basic education. As a result many have low levels of literacy and are unable to communicate effectively with their markets.

The use of cell phones and emails has become a must-have form of communication for most businesses in the world. “Emailing requires a computer or at least an email-enabled cell phone”, says Hay. “Many crafters do not have the means to buy the equipment needed for emailing and those that do often lack the necessary language and literacy skills to use email as a form of communication.”

Despite all these challenges, crafters are creative people who often come up with very creative solutions to complex problems. In many cases they have taken advantage of the availability of new cell phones enabling even the poorest crafters to access a key tool for communication.

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