

BLACK

Advice From The Shark Tank

WEALTH FOR LIFE

JUNE 2012

ENTERPRISE

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SPECIAL ANNIVERSARY EDITION

40
YEARS OF THE
NATION'S LARGEST
BLACK BUSINESSES



EVERYDAY HERO

A Designer Venture

Young entrepreneur promotes economic growth in Africa through fashion



ADIAT DISU WAS AN OPERATIONS AND COMMUNICATIONS

specialist at a major technology firm when she decided that she could make a difference helping the image and condition of her homeland in an area that she loved: fashion. Disappointed by the lack of African designers represented in New York Fashion Week and unsatisfied with the stereotypical images of African fashion that persist within the global fashion industry, such as tribal prints, head wraps, kente cloths, and dashikis, Disu decided to launch her own showcase. And while she acknowledges that traditional styles are still relevant, fashion from the continent has evolved into a broad range of modern styles and luxury brands that appeal to a global mass market.

So, in 2009, to assist African designers in having an international presence in the industry, Disu established Adirée (www.adiree.com), a New York-based full-service boutique public relations agency that manages up-and-coming luxury brands in fashion, beauty, art, and home décor through social media, consulting, and special events. The organization's premier event is Africa Fashion Week in New York, a multiday production of runway shows, vendor exhibitions, and industry networking forums held annually in July since 2010. The first Africa Fashion Week attracted more than 1,500 industry insiders, including buyers, retailers, celebrities, models, diplomats, and members of the regional, national, and international press. "The concept was to increase awareness about African fashion," says Disu, "and to break the stereotype. Africa Fashion Week redefines what African fashion is."

Disu, a native of Lagos, Nigeria, pitched her idea directly to the office of New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, emphasizing that the production would promote tourism to New York with 70% of the designers coming directly from Africa, thereby fostering a relationship between the U.S. and Africa. More than 25 designers from various African countries participate in the event.

Despite all the glitz and glamour of Africa Fashion Week, behind the scenes, the event supports nonprofits by donating to organizations that impact development in Africa. Since 2010, Adirée has donated approximately \$10,700 to three organizations: Indego Africa (www.indegoafrica.org), a social enterprise that provides more than 250 women artisans in Rwanda with access to export markets and job skills; Children's Wish Foundation of Canada (www.childrenswish.ca), a nonprofit that fulfills requests for children diagnosed with life-threatening illnesses; and the Nakate Project (www.nakateproject.com), which supports women in Uganda by promoting their handmade jewelry in the U.S.

Ultimately, Disu, 25, believes forming strategic alliances will be the key to stimulating economic growth and changing overall perceptions about Africa. She is partnering with organizations to bring Africa Fashion Week abroad to cities such as Tokyo, Milan, Paris, and London. In 2010, Adirée began working with the U.S. Agency for International Development's Competitiveness and Trade Expansion program (USAID/COMPETE; www.competeafrica.org), which advances trade between the U.S. and East and Central Africa, and builds the capacity of African firms to compete in the global marketplace. The two entities collaborate through the USAID/COMPETE marketing campaign, Origin Africa (www.originafrica.org), which develops and promotes African trade in various sectors, such as textiles/apparel, specialty foods, home décor, and fashion accessories. "We identify promising design talent in Africa and get them international exposure by working with Adirée and Africa Fashion Week New York," explains Susan Ellison-McGee, communications manager of USAID/COMPETE. "It's a great collaboration that allows the designers to get a sense of what it's like to work in the competitive global market."

—Brittany Hutson