

RETAIL

Reuse, recycle, re-educate

Second-hand books mean a first-rate education with this smart start-up

Education is important. And yet studying is expensive, with the annual cost of tuition and accommodation sometimes amounting to more than R50 000. Plus, you've got to think about textbooks. It's no wonder many are unable to afford what they need.

Mpodumo Doubada, a University of Cape Town graduate and University of SA honours student, found himself in this very situation: "When I was in first year, I couldn't afford a brand new textbook and struggled to get hold of an old one. I had to put up posters all over campus, call strangers, meet up somewhere and negotiate a price. I thought a one-stop place for trading textbooks would be much more effective."

From that first-year schlep, the idea for Pimp My Book was born. Doubada kicked his business off in February 2006 by selling books to friends in his dorm. "When we started, we were strictly a middle-man, taking commission. All we needed was to get the word out and sell as many books as we could. Now we buy the book directly or sell it on the student's behalf. We handle all the assessments, marketing, negotiation and sales. We put money back in students' pockets and save them time by doing collection and delivery as part of the package."

Handling a business and a full-time BCom Hons can be hard. But by waking up early and having five strategic partners, four casual staff, a team of IT students, ad hoc student employees, and a store manager, Doubada balances it all. "During our peak season, I work most of the day and off-peak I work three or four hours a day. When I have tests or exams, I don't work at all."

The biggest challenge has been finding a place to run the business. "We initially operated from a campus store after six months of tendering. Shortly afterwards... the campus bookstore [which sells new textbooks] complained and had all second-hand book operations banned. We then operated outside the Pick 'n Pay in Rondebosch for a few weeks. The university decision has been appealed... We feel they acted against the interest of students, entrepreneurship, and a free market."

UCT media liaison Ray Hartle says that, in terms of the institution's agreement with the book store, Atlas Books is "the only authorised retail distributor of academic books on campus".

What does the future hold for Pimp My Book? After opening a store in Parow to serve Unisa, Cape Peninsula University of Technology and University of the Western Cape students, Doubada plans to take his business across SA — and even across the continent. "Our mission is to make textbooks affordable and accessible... No one should struggle with their studies because they cannot afford books."

Eugene Yiga



TIPS TO GET TO THE TOP

Mpodumo Doubada's pointers for success:

- Vision:** Entrepreneurs see things differently. Keep your eyes open for problems to solve, routines to improve or needs to fill.
- Creativity:** Find innovative ways to make your ideas marketable.
- Courage:** Don't wait until you have the money, time or other any other resource. Conditions will never be perfect, so you might as well act now.
- Patience:** Whether you succeed or fail doesn't matter; as long as you learn.
- Passion:** Follow your heart; even if it means the whole world nags you to get a "real job".