



MEET ELIZABETH NGONZI – THE UNITED NATIONS IS ONE OF HER CLIENTS.....

Breaking in the industry, who gave you 'the start' to get in the industry? What steps did you take to get to where you are?

My first break was a political fundraiser in the home of a prominent family in Southern NJ. I volunteered all the services and provided some extras gratis. The opportunity came about following a conversation I had with the friend of the host. Basically, I told her about my concept and background and she immediately provided me with an introduction to her friend who was hosting the fundraiser. That one event manifested into at least five other events and

so on.... There are many other examples of occasions where I was given to an opportunity to share my talents, judged the potential value in terms of exposure and then delivered above and beyond the clients' and their guests' expectations to generate repeat- and add-on business.

There are many steps that I have taken since that first opportunity; however they fundamentally remain the same:

- Always focus on providing the clients and their guests with greater value than what was outlined in the contract
- Anticipate challenges that can occur during the planning stages and onsite, communicate those challenges as appropriate; always remain calm in the face of adversity and focus all parties on the solution rather than dwelling on the problem.
- Develop and maintain a network of individuals who will sell your services for you based on how you treated them, the ease of working with you and the quality of your output.
- Whenever you have an occasion to promote the efforts of those in your current and/or desired network -- do so. Vendors, clients and former employees, and those you admire will appreciate the fact that you looked out for them and at some point will reciprocate.

Share your knowledge and experience with others through:

- Teaching courses at a local community college
- Speaking at industry events, your alma mater, or other public events
- Writing/contributing to articles / blogs / books / twitter
- Mentoring your employees, aspirants to the industry and students who are trying to find their way
- Educating your clients about developments that affect their organizations and connecting them to peers in their industry

What would local individuals say about you and your company? Do you have any quotes from local power players?

Gwendolyn Corrin President and State Director Communities In Schools of New Jersey "It would not be an exaggeration to state that without the expertise Amazing Taste, Liz and her incredible staff our "Giant Leap to Greatness" fundraiser would not have been as successful as it was. Even with event partners like The 2008 Super Bowl Champion New York Giants, The NY Giants Foundation and CITI it took the talents of Amazing Taste to imbue our event with the professionalism and class that guests, sponsors, donors and partners will never forget!"

Geraldine Gallashaw Managing Director, Diversity The Bank of New York Mellon Corporation "The conference was great. Extremely well thought out. The mix of speakers was interesting and exactly perfect. The sessions were amazing. I had a great deal of difficulty choosing. Great job. It was well worth giving up a Saturday."

Christine Finckenor Internship Coordinator Millburn Township Schools "It has truly been a gift for our interns to be mentored by Liz through Millburn's Career Exploration Internship Program. She approaches her work with an open heart and has taught our interns not only the nuts and bolts of running your own business but how to do so with integrity and compassion. Her natural ability to strive for the most exacting standards while consistently giving back and fighting for the greater good in this world is a great model for our interns to aspire to."

Noel Wax Vice President, Sports CBS Radio "You made a lot out of a little. If ever you need a reference or recommendation for events you are trying to secure, please put me on the short list. I am impressed with your work ethic and how you handle your business. If I am ever to host a fundraising event, I would not hesitate to work with you."

Victor Nichols Partner Diversity Management & Communications "Thank you for your insight and leadership in creating an opportunity for partnership with such an important non-profit. We were delighted to support the work of an organization from within our own community by publishing their handbook and we most certainly are indebted to your tactful professionalism in facilitating this alliance ... Your ongoing commitment to engaging in projects that have a direct impact on the community is truly inspiring. It is great to have found a like-minded industry partner in your company, and I look forward to the next opportunity to collaborate with you and your 'Amazing' team."

What was the biggest achievement that you can say you've accomplished with your company? Why was it such an achievement to you?

I am very proud to acknowledge that Amazing Taste has raised millions of dollars for and generated valuable awareness about many worthwhile organizations, while at the same time developing memorable experiences for the guests/attendees of our events. However, I would have to say that I am most proud of our employees, interns, volunteers and core vendors. The reason being that they are high-quality individuals/companies that have connected to Amazing Taste based on an alignment with the company's core values and have subsequently remained committed during their tenure. This has consistently translated into the quality of experience we have been able to provide Amazing Taste's clients. The reason this has been important to me is because I have a vision for what can be delivered to the client and the impact I would like our services to have on their strategic objectives, however in order for me to do so, I need a team of committed professionals working with me to bring it to fruition. I believe that by treating the team well, focusing on how to help them reach their own objectives and clearly outlining expectations about client service, I have been able to help inspire them to give their best and derive satisfaction from their contributions. This all squarely speaks to the company's philosophy that: "the clients it serves, the vendors with whom it partners, and the individuals that form its team are inextricably linked and must therefore align to produce effective solutions."

What tips would you give someone else that was trying to get into your industry?

I receive many inquiries from those interested in getting into the industry and consistently tell them to:

- Volunteer their time with a local charity
- Offer to work as an unpaid intern for a local firm or request to shadow the principal of the firm
- Take a course at a local community college that provides basic information about the industry and connect them to others in the industry (e.g., classmates, guest speakers)
- Subscribe to industry publications to learn about the trends in and needs of the industry
- Join the local chapter of the association of your intended profession, participate in and volunteer your services at an industry conference

Was there a mistake that you made that if you would have had a partner or a mentor that could've been avoided?

I would have to say that I would have liked to have had a partner who is more administratively gifted than I am. My strengths lie in the more creative aspects of the business, working with clients/staff/vendors/media, and managing projects. Therefore, I wouldn't have to deal with some unpleasant issues around receivables and the like.

Helping non profit organizations: What are your recommendations to get sponsors

for events?

When reaching out to event sponsors, I recommend that non-profits have a clear understanding of their fundraising objectives, create a compelling offer that speaks to the benefits of supporting their mission in terms of marketing value to the prospective sponsor. For instance, an organization that focuses on empowering youth, should learn target companies that market to children/teens (e.g. toy companies, kids' retailers, computer manufacturers, amusement parks). They should also look at companies that do business in the organization's community, because such companies could potentially be interested in aligning themselves with organizations that bolster their community relations efforts. Beyond that, I would suggest that organizations should include business/corporate leaders on their boards, whose companies could potentially provide the core funding to the organization.

How do you believe Blacks (businesses) could benefit by strategic partnership? What is your advice?

I believe that strategic partnerships can help any business to grow beyond their existing core. I have personally created alliances for my company with various others that enabled us to participate in opportunities that may not otherwise have been accessible to us as a minority- and female-owned firm. The key to managing such alliances is to make certain that expectations and responsibilities are clearly outlined at the beginning and that the two parties' interests are aligned. The reason being that if there is a lack of transparency in the alliance and if the either party does not sincerely have the others' interests in mind as they make decisions, many problems can arise, brands can be eroded and ill feelings could arise that could potentially taint the relationship.

How did you get involved with the United Nations?

I became involved with the United Nations through my lifelong affiliation with the organization. Initially, we provided complimentary services so as to enable them to learn about our work, and were eventually invited to become a service provider to the organization.

What are organizations that our readers should join?

For those readers interested in pursuing careers in the field that I am, a wonderful book thored by NY Times Foreign Affairs columnist, Thomas L. Friedman. It was quite a complex and lengthy book to get through...despite my educational background, professional experience and connection to the content... however since it had been recommended to me by several people whose opinions I trust, I committed to read it through to the end. Essentially, the premise is that there are many factors (namely global internet access) that have leveled the playing field to significantly increase competition for opportunities that have traditionally been accessible to the few. This is illustrated through examples of off-shoring, smaller and leaner entrants into the marketplace who have destabilized the positioning of well-established brands and the decreasing competitiveness of American students against their counterparts around the world. Upon completion of the book, I concluded that flattening factors could potentially affect my business and that my team and I therefore needed to constantly innovate and position ourselves in such a way as to remain relevant despite the increased competition to our core business – events planning and management. Essentially,

what it taught me was that the gaining interest in our industry required that we re-position ourselves from competing on core services such as project management, to more value-added services such as concept development, corporate relationship management and focus on non-profit organizations.

What are the steps to gain "known" or "high profile" clients?

First and foremost, one has to constantly remain knowledgeable about current events and requiring that when the official work day ends, networking and research begins. It requires one to constantly participate in/attend events/conferences where one is apt to meet the "right" people. It also requires that one serves in leadership roles so as to raise one's own profile. A great tip I learned from one of my mentors is that when one learns about a high profile person's successes or is touched by something he/she has done, one should find a way to send a note (preferably hand-written) acknowledging it. Most people would shy away from doing this because they feel that perhaps the person is too busy or inaccessible, however, with enough research, one can find contact information for most people. A recent way that I began connecting with thought-leaders that I admire is through Twitter. I basically establish a relationship with them by following them, commenting on or distributing their posts and in some instances, they will acknowledge my efforts and begin to engage me.

How do you believe the Black community (globally) could begin to invest in their community - socially and financially?

I believe that the global Black community needs to focus on entrepreneurship and education as means to improve socially and financially. The current global model of reliance on external parties, keeps our communities in a cycle of dependence and at the bottom of a widening gap in all areas. Through entrepreneurial endeavors, we can create new opportunities for others and increase the capital flowing through our communities. Through increased educational attainment, we can become competitive and therefore more relevant in the increasingly "flattened" global economy. The aforementioned will require that those in our communities who current have access to capital, opportunities and are educated to have to become more committed to uplifting those in our communities who are less fortunate. It will necessitate the development of a long-term vision of and strategy for getting to an improved future reality, a focus on community above self, teamwork and succession planning to sustain current efforts.

Black Family Reunions - from start to finish, what do you believe are the necessary steps to create family reunions that transform communities?

Black Family Reunions are valuable gatherings that foster a sense of unity among participants, provide valuable links to African-American history, generate opportunities for vendors/exhibitors/participants, and serve as recreational outlets for many. In order for these gatherings to become more transformative to communities, there's a need to create service projects that can be executed during the Reunions. Currently, non-profits are provided exhibit space to support their outreach efforts, however, this could be taken further through various participant activation opportunities. Examples could include a mini-fundraising activity for kids, volunteering a few hours with a local charity, providing orphans or homeless families an opportunity to attend the Reunion gratis.

Who was your mentor?

I have had many mentors throughout my life, however, the first and foremost has always been my mom *Hilda*, who was a pioneer in my family's country of origin, Uganda. She was the first on-air personality and created the first lifestyle program in the country, enabling her to now become recognized as Uganda's first Martha Stewart. She subsequently went on to become one of the first women in Uganda's Foreign Service and was subsequently one of the first women posted to the US as a diplomat. She then went on to work in various leadership roles at the United Nations Development Programme – eventually retiring a few years ago having spearheaded the organization's NETAID event, which was the first simulcast event on the Internet. Through her many examples, I learned the importance of maintaining an attitude of generosity to others -- resulting in the creation of good will in all efforts that one undertakes. She taught me the importance of always putting one's best foot forward no matter what and staying the course despite challenges that may arise. She also provided me with a first-rate education, and exposed me to various cultures, lifestyles and people that enabled me to develop a unique and valuable perspective on how the world works and how to leverage my strengths to thrive within it.

What causes do you believe that every Black woman should get involved in and why?

Black women should get involved in causes that:

Strengthen our communities by educating our children; keeping our youth engaged in positive activities; providing business opportunities for our adults; provide skills and support for the formerly incarcerated or addicted; and/or connect Seniors to the young.

Help to find solutions/cures to ailments that affect Black women: Cancer/HIV/Diabetes prevention, detection and treatment organizations; Domestic Violence prevention and victim assistance organizations; and centers that provide counseling services for Depression.

A good source for finding reputable charities is Charity Navigator <http://www.charitynavigator.org/> , which rates and evaluates the financial health of over 5,400 of America's largest charities. Many of these charities have affiliate chapters throughout the country.

What tips if any do you have for non profit organizations who would like to create fundraising events?

The funding pool for events has steadily been drying up, existing fundraising event models are somewhat dated and there are many new organizations competing for the sponsors/attendees. Consequently non-profits should identify ways to create unique opportunities to engage their target audiences. Generally speaking, organizations rely on the gala/dinner model for their major fundraisers, however those types of events can very costly to produce in terms of financial outlay and volunteer time. They should therefore look for

more innovative ways to raise money. One such model is through mobile fundraising campaigns, pioneered by the Mobile Giving Foundation (mgive.org). Such campaigns can be incorporated into a live event (e.g., sporting events, community events), or managed through billboard advertisements and/or through a direct mail campaign. The way that such campaigns work is that the donor is provided with a number to which he/she can send a text message, and \$5 is automatically billed to his/her cell phone bill and subsequently donated to the organization. The relative ease of making the donation and the low dollar amount increases the likelihood of participation by existing donors and engages younger ones...who otherwise would not donate through traditional means.

Please give me your purpose, your success story.

I believe that I have accomplished what I have because my primary focus is always on how to positively impact the lives of others. It may seem idealistic and there may be those of your readers who question the fact that I have chosen to make my mark on non-profit-organizations through a for-profit endeavor, however, I believe that the business model that I have chosen enables me to make an impact on a more significant level to many non-profit-organizations and derive more personal gratification than if I had chosen to work for an individual non-profit-organization, remained in the Corporate arena, or focused my business exclusively on social/corporate events.

"The varied experiences I have had in my life have enabled me to develop an appreciation for that which is GLOBALLY FABULOUS and how to parlay that into opportunities TO DO GOOD! I see my life's purpose as that of a person who has been bestowed with many talents, opportunities, access and interests...to make a SIGNIFICANT IMPACT ON THE WORLD. I work hard and play hard, but always do so, knowing that which I want to accomplish with my limited time on God's Earth. I consequently strive to surround myself with those people who are similarly-inclined." ~ Elizabeth N. Ngonzi

Is there a Black historical figure that you try to pattern your life after and why?

Barbara Smith has been a business owner whom I have admired from the time I celebrated my 21st birthday in her landmark restaurant, B. Smith (in its original location in the NY Theater District). The experiences I had in her restaurant from that time until I wrote my application to Cornell's famed Hotel School to its Hospitality MBA program in 1995, inspired me to make her the subject of my application essay. She, in my opinion has been the embodiment of what we as black people have and continue to contribute to the culinary arts, upscale dining and general culture. I was particularly inspired by the fact that she leveraged her former life as a model to re-invent herself and create a successful business that provided professional African-Americans (without excluding other ethnicities) an enjoyable and high-quality dining experience that paid homage to her roots. I continue to be a fan of her endeavors and admirer of her continued pioneering efforts in the development of her lifestyle brand.

What do you believe President Obama's election can do for our community and what do you believe that we can do to help President Obama?

I believe that his election provided our community with an understanding that the American dream is accessible to all, if we are willing to put forth the effort to make it a reality. It also demonstrated that we have to look beyond our community for support through alliances with others who have access to opportunities and information that enables us to accomplish our goals. I believe that my virtue of the fact that we have an African-American family living in the White House whose faces we are able to see in the media on an almost daily basis, helps to negate the negative images of our community that have traditionally been portrayed. Most importantly, his presidency has demonstrated that even when we achieve the dream (i.e. the election), we have to work doggedly to sustain it and have to surround ourselves with the right support system to enable us to maintain the success. President Obama has called on all Americans to adopt an attitude of service to country as a means to help move us out our current situation. I believe that it is imperative that our communities respond to that call to action, because we are the ones who stand to lose the most if the country does not rebound. I also believe that his call is empowering us to help provide the solutions to elements that ail our communities, versus waiting for someone else to rescue us.

Do you have anything else that you'd like to tell our readers?

We are living in the world of an uncertain global economy, however I believe that if one is able to find a way to create value within his/her community and/or world, is committed to sticking through the ups and downs, has or is developing the necessary skill sets and network to thrive into the future, this is a time of tremendous potential for him/her. It is when "the chips are down" that those who recognize the opportunity presented by a down economy are able to truly innovate and therefore realize their potential to improve their own conditions, while positively impacting others' lives.

[Need to connect with her? Tweet to us and let us know!](#)