

**Move!** inspiration

# Perfect chemistry

Top Durban businesswoman Nelly Shezi chats to **Siyabonga Ngcangisa** about her rise to become one of the world's most successful chemicals manufacturers



**M**any successful entrepreneurs become socialites, hosting flashy parties in their swanky homes. It seems the more money they make, the more recognition they want. But there are those who are happy to carry on working hard quietly, without any fanfare or spotlight on them. These are the real achievers – like Durban businesswoman Nelly Shezi.

## Modest despite success

Nelly is among those triumphant figures who won't grace glamour events despite her success, and she is shy to speak about her accomplishments.

This, despite her chemical business making profits and Nelly receiving prestigious accolades and awards since launching her company in 2007.

However, after some persuasion, she finally agreed to share the story of her success with *Move!*. It took resigning

from her full-time job, and taking risks, to fulfil her desires and achieve her dream of owning a business.

We find Nelly in the office at her warehouse in Pinetown, about 16km west of Durban, with some of her staff. The business, called Elegant Line Chemicals, produces water purifiers, detergents (cleaning materials), industrial commodities and lubricants.

## A woman's ambassador

Her clientele include King Shaka International Airport and the Ethekwini Municipality. Nelly's business focuses on empowering women, and her overall staff complement is 70 percent female and 30 percent male.

She welcomes us into her warehouse, a zinc structure whose large open space accommodates the various chemicals that she manufactures herself, before supplying them to clients locally and internationally.

"We've seen this business go from strength to strength, and our beginnings were humble. When I started, I had no major capital. I had to rely on the money I had saved up before I left my job," she says.

Nelly has a BTech: analytical chemistry degree from Natal Technikon, which is now called the Durban University of Technology. She also has a marketing diploma from the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

But five years ago, she felt limited working for someone else. "Being employed has its own challenges and restrictions, so I decided to go solo."



PICTURES: SOLOMON MASHWEN



**LEFT AND ABOVE:** Nelly checks on chemicals in her warehouse  
**RIGHT:** Nelly is as comfortable and proficient in the kitchen as she is in her own business environment



### Self-employment issues

Nelly did not immediately give up her day job. Instead, she reported to her employer during the day and became her own boss after hours. This, she says, went on for two years.

"I rented a very small office space, but later had cash-flow problems. It was a nightmare. At the time, I was only doing distribution and did not manufacture the chemicals. My first six months were the hardest."

In those six months, she was not known in business circles and couldn't make a profit. Her staff were unpaid, while the landlord was demanding the rent money.

She could not afford to purchase a truck to transport her goods, and had to rely on her own car, a Toyota RunX.

"The landlord threatened to shut down the office. We begged him to give us three months. It was hard, but I made him understand how important that business was for me, and how I was determined to make a success of it."

### A change of strategy

Nelly was on the ropes and stranded, but still she did not give in. "I had to be strategic. I changed the marketing plan of the business altogether, and that's where my marketing qualifications came into play. I started to visit potential clients at least once a month, and having relooked at the meaning of the word 'elegant', I promised myself that I would not fail."

Part of Nelly's strategy was to recognise what was blocking her progress. Later, she realised that the entire founda-

tion of her business was shaky and needed a complete overhaul.

"I stopped waiting for people to come to me. I went out there and marketed my business. I started registering my products with the South African Bureau of Standards (SABS), and my marketing became more aggressive."

Among her noticeable shortcomings was that she was not in touch with her end users. That's when she launched her website.

### Fantasies kept her strong

She had a demanding day job, along with the long hours and sacrifices. These affected her social and family time, but what was lying ahead gave her courage. At the time, only Nelly and a receptionist were running the business. But making adjustments and admitting the things she did wrong, finally paid off. Soon, glimmers of hope began to show.

"In 2009, there was a huge financial improvement. That's when I decided to leave my day job and go full time on my own," she says, adding that the

landlord soon became a big fan.

"Rent was now being paid on time. I started getting big contracts, some for five years, and that is when I began to breathe. I employed more people and moved to a bigger space here (Pine-town). That's when we began manufacturing our own chemicals."

But first they had to test their manufacturing prowess by producing simple chemicals such as cleaning materials, before adding water purifiers and other, more complicated, chemical products to their stock.

### Getting recognition

Now her business is one of the biggest chemical suppliers in the world, with clients in India, Zimbabwe, Mozambique and the Reunion Islands.

"I applied for export funds at the department of trade and industry, and was lucky to receive them as the business was already high profile," says Nelly, who inherited her entrepreneurship skills from her father. "He was a poor man who saw a gap in the market by buying himself an old bakkie and using it to transport locals."

Following Nelly's years of perseverance that resulted from her marketing and chemical manufacturing exploits, her presence in the business sector was felt at last. In 2010, the Durban Chamber of Business and Transnet named her The Emerging Transporter of the Year, and that same year she was a runner-up in The Most Innovative Sector, and a finalist at the Ithala Business Achiever Awards. ♦

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