

Building a true African haircare brand with AfroBotanics



By [Lauren Hartzberg](#)

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In six years, South African natural haircare brand AfroBotanics went from being manufactured in founder Ntombenhle Khathwane's garage to a fully equipped factory in Midrand, and now occupies prime shelf space in some of the country's largest retailers.



Ntombenhle Khathwane

Displaying a keen willingness to learn and unafraid to ask for help along her startup journey, Khathwane's rise to success stems from AfroBotanics – at its inception – being one of the few local natural haircare brands present in a market that was ready to explode. And it really has... with newly attractive ethnic haircare aisles fully stocked with local and international brands alike looking to capitalise on the growing movement of women that have ditched harsh styling tools and chemicals in an effort to embrace and properly care for the hair they were born with.

Community upliftment

AfroBotanics products are infused with natural ingredients, like aloe vera and coconut oil, that are scientifically-derived and sourced from various locations throughout the African continent.

"I wanted a performance product. At the end of the day people don't care if it's local or black-owned, people care if the product works or not," said Khathwane when we sat down with her at the [Clicks Curls](#) event held in Cape Town.

"All the oils benefit a community somewhere. I buy my coconut oil in Mozambique, my avocado oil and baobab oil in

Nelspruit, and my shea butter is from Ghana. So every time somebody buys a product of mine it goes back into the community."

As a small business owner, Khathwane has also taken a decision to invest in an especially economically-depressed community in Makapanstad in the North West.

"It has a very high unemployment rate amongst young people, but it also has aloe vera growing everywhere. So I approached the community and said 'I'll invest R20,000 to get the right kind of aloe growing for you guys to then process it and sell it to me in aloe vera gel and aloe vera juice'. That's a project that we hope to see started by the end of the year."

"You're never too small to start giving back. It's important for me to use African ingredients not only from a product performance perspective, but to economically activate our communities."



Here, Khathwane shares the highs, lows and learnings of her small business journey.

■ ***Tell us about your background. What were you doing before starting AfroBotanics?***

I studied Politics and Philosophy and minored in Economics at the University of Natal. After university, I went into government in 1999 with the intention of contributing to our democracy and a better South Africa. I worked there for eight years and it started feeling redundant, so I started looking for business opportunities.

I was in Nelspruit in Mpumalanga, which is a very economically depressed and rural province, and I wanted to start a manufacturing business that would employ people and also show them that government is not the only destination for employment.

I had never worn my hair natural because my hair is coarse and dry. I got the idea for AfroBotanics by watching my grandmother mix aloe vera gel and marula oil and put it on her hair - her hair went amazingly soft. I thought 'wow, this is a business opportunity - I'm sure there are many women like me that are looking for the opportunity to wear their hair natural.'

So I quit my job in 2010, took my R240,000 pension and invested it into starting this business.

■ ***How has the expanding natural hair movement helped your business grow?***

When I started out I was the only brand catering to natural African hair. It helped me get into retail. From a business perspective, competition has grown immensely, but that's great because it gives women options. That means there's not a single woman that can say 'I don't have the tools for my kind of hair.'

With AfroBotanics we focus a lot on education...we had to, to encourage women to feel comfortable with their natural hair

and show them how to care for it. At first, bloggers and retailers thought it was a passing phase but it's growing and it's here to stay. Not just in South Africa but the entire continent.



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■ **Share with us the process of getting your product on the shelf - from concept to manufacturing, and finally retail.**

In 2010 I entered the Pitch & Polish business competition and I won. I was flown to the States where I was able to meet a mentor who produces natural haircare products, and she introduced me to trichologists and formulators. When I came back home, my brand at the time was built around avocado oil because it wasn't big back then. I formulated and tested for over a year and then I eventually started on the branding and packaging process.

My first batch had a total of about 2,000 products, with a range of five products. Then I realised that I don't have a place to sell them. I wrote a business plan, but business plans hardly ever work out the way you expect them to. I also looked at online stores, which aren't very big among black women. I had to go to markets and find bloggers to test my product. I grew my product one person at a time.

I started getting one order a day and then two, three orders a day and then I realised my website wasn't built for retail, and I had to find somebody to build a proper website. Then I realised I needed a bigger range, more money ... how am I going to find it? I went to my family and asked for loans. My first retail listing was for seven products and by the time I listed with Clicks last year I was able to list twelve products.

I started off manufacturing in a garage and now I have a nice factory in Midrand and it's growing. We've got bigger machinery now and I employ six people.



■ **What would you say have been the biggest challenges on your entrepreneurship journey?**

As an entrepreneur you have to decide from the onset how you want to distribute your product. I made the decision that I want to build an African brand available throughout the continent, competing equally with international brands. And I wanted to do that through mass retail, so I wanted to create a premium mass product.

That presents two problems for me. It means that I must have the capacity to produce mass products for me to make money, and I must have the capacity to distribute products in mass so that everyone can get them. So firstly, it was hard

getting market access. Retailers generally don't want to look at small businesses to supply them. It took me from 2011 to 2014-15 to get into retail. By the time I got into retail I exhausted all my funds. So how do I upscale my factory so that it meets capacity?

I've had challenges with my supply chain; I've had orders from Clicks, Game and Pick n Pay that I couldn't fulfil at that time. I overcame this by going to these retailers and telling them that I need help. Game, for instance, now orders every two weeks instead of every week to give me time to manufacture. Clicks is actually loaning me money to capacitate my factory.

Lots of challenges! Challenges at startup phase. Challenges at scale-up phase. So I can't wait to see what happens when we get bigger. We've launched a kiddies range, which will be exclusive to Clicks, and then we're going into natural bodycare... like body washes, body creams. It'll be interesting to see what challenges come as we grow, but I'm not afraid to ask for help.

Visit [AfroBotanics online](#) to shop the range and view the list of stockists, and connect with the brand on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#).

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