

A helping hand

We meet two local businesses who've been supported by Lewisham Council's Business Advisory Service (BAS)

The Business Advisory Service (BAS) has been 'Opening Doors' for countless numbers of local people wanting mentoring or assistance in setting up their own company. And it's BAS's experience and knowledge in guiding these aspiring entrepreneurs through the hazards and opportunities that exist that has enabled many companies to succeed and grow.

Set up to encourage business growth within the borough, BAS provides advice and information for small and medium-sized businesses, whether it's help with building a business plan or setting up a company website. And it's not just practical advice and information that the service is able to provide, it also runs free training sessions, seminars with keynote speakers and networking events where business owners can meet fellow professionals and suppliers and keep abreast of the latest cutting-edge ideas.

Tarem Services

Titus Komolafe, director of commercial cleaning company Tarem Services in Brockley, is one such business mogul to have benefited from BAS's help.

After setting up the company from his brother's bedroom in Woolwich in 1999 with a £10,000 Prince's Trust Grant, Titus now employs 50 people and expects his turnover this year to be around £400,000.

'When I started, I was flipping burgers by day as manager of a McDonalds restaurant and then cleaning houses in the evening because I couldn't afford to give up work until everything was in place,' says Titus.

Titus launched his cleaning company in the late 1990s, helped by his brother Samuel and sister Deborah.

'It was a boom time and there were lots of estate agents popping up and young professionals moving



BAS has been useful in helping me to understand the tendering process

TITUS KOMOLAFE

into Canary Wharf who weren't keen on cleaning. We saw this as a gap in the market that we could fill. We learnt the business as we went along, did a training course and got the qualifications and certificates.'

Within a year, the business was up and running and Titus moved into his first proper office in New Cross. Six years later and with new premises at Brockley Cross Business Centre, Titus decided the time was ripe for a change of direction.

'We moved away from residential cleaning to commercial cleaning as we wanted more stable, residual and permanent contracts,' he says. 'It was a good move.'

Switching to new clients, who included commercial offices and schools, meant adopting new business practices.

'BAS has been very useful,' says Titus. 'Over the years I've picked up tips, been pointed in the right direction and gained knowledge from the seminars and



Michelle, right, with her daughter Tamara

I didn't know how to move the business forward. BAS opened my eyes to the help and support that was around

MICHELLE JAMES

workshops. More recently the service has been useful in helping me to understand the tendering process. Richard Dickson in particular has been instrumental in helping me tender for Government contracts. We've recently won a contract with the Olympic Delivery Authority and now Richard is helping me put together other tenders.

'I've also formed a number of partnerships with other cleaning companies, as some Government departments will only work with certain sized companies. BAS is helping us with that.'

Despite the recession, Titus fears little for the future. 'As long as our clients are doing well, they will always need someone to clean up. If all goes well, we want to expand the business further by purchasing a smaller cleaning company – and we'll definitely be needing BAS's help for that!'

HoopBlast

The expertise provided by BAS has also proved invaluable to Michelle James, who runs HoopBlast, a hula hoop aerobic and dance company whose ethos is based on making fitness fun.

Inspired to get involved in the American craze after getting hooked at a fitness event in London, the qualified social worker undertook various training courses before quitting her job in October last year to concentrate full time on her business. 'I was struggling to keep both my paid work and my hobby going so I had to make a decision, and I jumped,' says Michelle.

Having successfully got the business off the ground, with classes at the Moonshot Community Centre in New Cross full to capacity, Michelle was beginning to reach

a standstill. 'I was doing only one class a week and wasn't generating much income,' she says. 'I didn't know how to move the business forward. BAS opened my eyes to the help and support that was around: funding opportunities, business support and ways to network with other companies for potential business.'

'I've been to two networking events now and they've really opened doors for me. I've received funding from Deptford and New

Cross PCT to offer classes to the wider community, and BAS is now helping me fill in my Business Awards application. My business is now starting to grow and I'm looking at expanding into schools and getting involved with corporate companies.'

Lewisham Business Advisory Service is based at Opening Doors, 121 Lewisham High Street SE13. Tel: 020 8297 1171, email infobas@lewisham.gov.uk



Beat the credit crunch

Lewisham Council is hosting a free event to help businesses during these difficult times.

Workshops and sessions will cover finance, sales and marketing, customer services and networking.

Monday 11 May 2009, 5.30pm–8pm

Civic Suite, Lewisham Town Hall, Catford SE6

For further information or to book a place call Deborah Efemini on 020 8297 5635, email deborah.efemini@lewisham.gov.uk or go to www.lewisham.gov.uk/Business





Ask Tony

Tony Goldstein, Start-up Development Manager for Lewisham Business Advisory Service (BAS), answers your questions

Contact Tony on email at infobas@lewisham.gov.uk, in writing at Opening Doors, 121 Lewisham High Street SE13 6AT or call 020 8297 1171 x 305

Q One of my nephews is a keen car mechanic and keeps his family's and neighbours' cars roadworthy to bring in a little extra income. He would like to open his own car repair business but his wages aren't great and he doesn't have any savings. He has visited the bank but they have asked for a breakdown of costs and financial forecasts. How should he go about this?

Pauline, New Cross

A As long as your nephew is over 18, which is the minimum age we can work

with at the BAS, we would be happy to offer him support and guidance in writing his business plan and helping to get finance. Banks generally lend on a match funding basis, which means they will match what you put in, 50/50. A new scheme, the Enterprise Finance Guarantee, enables a bank to lend a greater amount than 50 per cent. Details can found at www.berr.gov.uk or by searching Google. Other loans up to £10,000 may be available with zero contribution from the borrower, but you must have a viable robust business plan. Get your nephew to call me on the number above.

Q I would like some information about starting an online business, although I don't know what kind of business yet. Where should I start?

Ramona, Catford

A Ramona, it's really too big a question to answer here but I will send you a questionnaire to help you decide on a business idea. It would be a good idea to come to one of our free pre-start awareness seminars, where we would explain about starting in business, including an online business. We would also explain what is involved in setting up an e-commerce website and selling products from it.

Q I have been an engineer for over 10 years but was recently made redundant. There is not much opportunity out there, even abroad, so I have decided to start my own consultancy. Should I set up as a limited company or sole trader? And should I wait until the next tax year to buy insurance, upload the website, advertise and buy other

things, and then claim them as company expenses?

Harry, Brockley

A Briefly, registering as a sole trader is simpler, with a self assessment tax return to fill in at the end of the year, although you will be solely responsible for the debts of the business. A limited company is more complex, with more responsibility during the year. For example, you must submit

yearly accounts to Companies House, an annual tax return, and run PAYE when you pay yourself and your staff. However, you may be protected from your liabilities.

As regards the second question, the tax year starts in April, but you can register up to three months after you start trading and claim all legitimate expenses, as long as you provide receipts. Contact me at BAS for further information.