

# Sisters doing it for themselves

We talk to four black women who are making their mark in business – and enjoying it, too

It used to be rare for a woman to set up her own business, and even more unusual if she was black. Thankfully things have changed, and black women are now succeeding in business. We spoke to four inspiring women from Lewisham who decided to go it alone – with a little help from Lewisham's Business Advisory Service (BAS).

Key to any successful business is creating a loyal clientele. For Yana Johnson, director of Yana Cosmetics in Brockley, word of mouth has been vital, especially with fans including comedienne and writer Angie Le Mar and dedicated customers from as far away as Belgium. In addition to a custom-blended foundation service, Yana Cosmetics offers

skincare consultations, make-up sessions and beauty treatments as well as photoshoot and bridal services. Although targeting the black market, Yana says all skin tones are welcome: 'It's not a black business – we have everyone from Greek and Chinese clients to 60-year-old white women who love the yellow-based foundation as it takes out the pink-tinge of their skin. The products are also very good for people with skin problems.'

With a string of awards, including winner of the 2005 Black Enterprise Awards, Yana's business has proved to be a huge hit. All the same, the support she received from the Business Advisory Service was invaluable, especially when it came



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Caroline Afolalu

to finding out what assistance and funding the business was entitled to.

In order to get customers in the first place, every new business needs a 'hook' – a unique product or service to sell that fills a gap in the market. For Yanike Thomas, director of Skyline Transfers, inspiration came from across the pond: 'Anyone who's been to the US will know about the minibus pickup service they have which takes travellers to and from the airport,' she says. Adapting the principle to London, Skyline Transfers' Mercedes Benz Vito Traveliners pick up or drop off



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Yanike Thomas

‘I felt like I was missing out not having a website so I’ve decided to set one up and my son’s helping me get started’

Sharon Gritton



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travellers to Gatwick and Heathrow. As the business is based in South East London, it is able to offer a door-to-door service and, by transporting around eight people at one time, costs are shared between passengers. Yanike has recently branched out into school runs.

Yanike praises the advice she received from the BAS. ‘They were very helpful,’ she says. ‘My advisor,

Tony Goldstein, was like a mentor. We had a meeting once a month and he helped me create a business plan. I was even given a voucher to get promotional leaflets printed.’ Yanike hopes that in a few years Skyline Transfers will be the first name people think of when they need transportation. ‘It was difficult getting started,’ she admits. ‘There’s that risk element. But I always wanted to be my own boss and, although it’s hard work, I love it.’

Having a unique selling point is even more important when you’re in a competitive industry. Sharon Gritton, owner of Professionails, a nail and beauty salon on Brockley Road, is aware of this but remains confident that she and her staff provide an unrivalled service: ‘We use quality products and, while many other salons use electric files, which can cause lots of damage to nails, we do everything by hand.’ A huge range of other treatments are also on offer including waxing, massage, tanning and even a registered osteopath who comes in once a week. As well as receiving handy business leads and practical information from the Lewisham BAS, Sharon has a more unusual source of guidance when it comes to online promotion – her son: ‘He knows more about the internet than me!’ she says. ‘I felt like I was

## WANT TO KNOW MORE?

### Business Advisory Service (BAS)

121 Lewisham High Street,

London SE13 6AT

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[www.lewisham.gov.uk/business](http://www.lewisham.gov.uk/business)

### Professionails

193 Brockley Road, London SE4 2RS

☎ 020 8692 3073

### Skyline Transfers Ltd

☎ 020 8771 8577

[www.skylinetransfers.com](http://www.skylinetransfers.com)

### Yana Cosmetics Ltd

7a and 9a Brockley Cross,

London SE4 2AB

☎ 0871 200 3478

[www.yanacosmetics.com](http://www.yanacosmetics.com)

### Beautiful Foods Ltd

Unit 10c, Lewisham Business Centre,

Juno Way SE14 5RW

☎ 020 8469 4117

[www.beautifulfoods.co.uk](http://www.beautifulfoods.co.uk)

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The internet has proved to be a useful tool for Caroline Afolalu, Director of Beautiful Foods catering and food manufacturers. The company, which she set up five years ago, produces African snacks and English buffet food for special occasions, functions and meetings. She also sells to a number of outlets and stores, including Tesco. Like many other local people starting their own business, Caroline contacted the BAS, which gave her the support she needed to launch Beautiful Foods online. ‘They helped me set up the website and produce my business plan, too,’ she says. ‘Now there are five people working here and, although it was tough in the beginning, I’m enjoying work even more now.’