

Soap stars



Entering one of the units on a small industrial estate near Hastings, the first thing you notice is the smell. Not so much the odours of grease and oil coming from the workshops of nearby engineering firms, but the fragrance of soap. I'd like to say I could immediately recognise the whiffs of lemongrass, geranium, cinnamon, and eucalyptus, but I must admit to reading the labels.



A Township Trades worker from the Khayelitsha township in South Africa.

I'm standing in the new premises of the Visionary Soap Company, set up on their kitchen table by Monica Norley and Rebecca Strong nearly four years ago. I remember visiting the old place: carefully climbing a creaky, thin wooden staircase set at an almost impossible angle, which lead to a cramped, but homely production and storage area with a leaky roof. Better than the original kitchen table perhaps, but not suitable for the ongoing needs of this growing, and increasingly successful, venture. Back in the company's new home, the team is busy mixing ingredients for another batch of soap, and I'm invited to help out.

The creation of handmade soap is an intensive process that takes hours to complete. Even when the soap's finished it takes weeks to dry out properly before it can be trimmed and packaged. Monica and her team have worked tirelessly to make sure the products they manufacture and sell are high quality, and made from fair trade, natural and organic ingredients. And it's not just soap - they make bath and body oils, lip balms, and body butters too.

Having started by selling to nearby shops and local communities in East Sussex, the business has grown to supply retailers all over the UK and abroad, from Russia to the United Arab Emirates. There is an online shop too. A major success story has been securing regular business from Oxfam, whose retail arm is now a key stockist, and keen to do more. "I'm working on their Christmas order already!" says Monica.

On the day I visit, the company has just taken delivery of their first shipment of soap from a social enterprise in South Africa. Township Trades provides training for young people in the Khayelitsha township whose lives have been impacted in some way by HIV/Aids, in an area where unemployment is extremely high. Part of the money raised by selling the soap they produce goes towards an entrepreneurial scholarship fund for trainees that leave to start a venture of their own. So, although some production still takes place in the UK, larger orders can now be met more easily, while supporting a genuine fair trade partnership.

"Our goal has always been to bring about social change and make a positive impact" says Monica. "We see this partnership as a great way to bring this dream to fruition".

All this extra activity means the company needs additional working capital, and Triodos Bank has recently been able to help by providing an overdraft facility.

Monica likes working with a bank that fits with her own values. "It's incredibly affirming for us that our vision and excitement are genuinely shared and supported", she says. "Triodos has taken time to learn about us and our industry, and truly understand what we're trying to achieve".

I leave impressed and inspired by the commitment and dedication of this small team. They are delivering first class products and service, without compromising their principles. Another typical Triodos Bank customer, enjoying more than a whiff of success.

Visit www.visionarysoap.co.uk or call 01424 460 022 for more.

Paul Nicoll, Regional Manager, London and South East England

Monica Norley will tell the story of the Visionary Soap Company first hand at this year's annual meeting in Bristol. If you'd like to join us to hear it, please fill in the reply card in the centre of your magazine or e-mail events@triodos.co.uk, and reserve your free place.



Triodos Bank's Paul Nicoll takes a hands on approach.