

Tracey West is cooking up a successful food brand.

Leap. Run. Grow.

THREE ENTREPRENEURS
GET EXPERT ADVICE ON
TAKING THEIR COMPANIES
TO THE NEXT LEVEL
BY TAMARA E. HOLMES

MONEY & POWER

Black women owned 1.3 million businesses that generated \$52.6 billion in revenue in 2015, according to an American Express report. Yet our ventures make less money and hire fewer employees than those of women of other races. So this summer ESSENCE launched Leap. Run. Grow., an initiative designed to help women at different stages of business improve their chances of being successful. Here, small-biz expert Kathey Porter coaches three entrepreneurs on how to strike gold.



TRACEY WEST, 45
TRACEY WEST IRRESISTIBLE
POUND CAKES
ATLANTA

When Tracey West was growing up, her Aunt Ola's pound cake was the centerpiece of every family function. So after her aunt died, West sought to keep her memory alive by sharing the treasured dessert through an Internet-based business. "I became an entrepreneur to continue her legacy," West says.

Launched in February 2012, Tracey West Irresistible Pound Cakes sells five

variations, including butter rum and red velvet. West used her own funds from her job as a project manager to convert her basement into a commercial kitchen.

In the past year, West has received certifications from the National Minority Supplier Development Council (NMSDC) and the Women's Business Enterprise National Council (WBENC), which help her to find contracts set aside for minorities and women. However, her growth has hit a snag. Though five stores want to carry her pound cakes, she hasn't been able to capitalize on these opportunities due to time constraints and the limitations of her kitchen. She has reached out to co-packers, companies that manufacture and package food products for businesses, but most will only work with enterprises that produce bigger orders than West currently does. "I'm in a situation where

the requests for my products are at a volume that's too much for me to handle on my own, yet too small for a co-packer to assist."

Challenge: Taking the venture full-time while increasing production.

Porter's prescription for success: Focus on the funds. Over the next

12 to 18 months, West should aim to save enough to handle day-to-day living and business expenses, Porter recommends. "Entrepreneurs should also have an emergency fund to cover unexpected business costs," says Porter. "Tracey should have an additional three to six months [of savings] to cover contingencies."

Use networks to her advantage. West has had difficulty finding a co-packer that will work with her, but she needs to secure a contract manufacturer that can replicate her recipe and sufficiently fill large orders, giving her the freedom to concentrate on other aspects of building the company. Her involvement in the NMSDC and WBENC can be beneficial, Porter says. Those organizations have developed relationships with co-packers and other businesses that are willing to collaborate with their members, so West should ask them for assistance in making a connection.

Clarify her brand. While she has received interest from consumers, retailers and corporate clients, those are all distinct markets, Porter points out. West doesn't necessarily have to choose one over another, but she might want to keep them differentiated by developing specific packaging for each market, for example. Being clear about her core client will help her to better articulate her strategy for bringing in business. »