# INTERVIEW WITH UNCUTXTRA MAGAZINE VOLUME 12 COVER STAR: PAUL ONWUANIBE

Landmark Africa is no doubt one of the biggest Business Leisure lifestyle brands in Nigeria if not the biggest. It’s such a commendable feat that has been achieved by the brain behind the brand. For this 12th volume of the Uncutxtra magazine which is an Entrepreneurial issue, Afrobeatsglobal presenter Omobolanle Adigun (@OMOBOLANLEADIGUN\_) had an interesting conversation with the CEO of the Landmark Africa group, PAUL ONWUANIBE. The interview unraveled a lot of answers to knowledgeable questions. Paul Onwaunibe in this interview discusses his success journey, some of the challenges the industry and he as an individual have been faced with thus far, some rudiments to success for aspiring entrepreneurs, some facts about his personal life and a lot more.

1. What inspired the Brand name ‘Landmark Africa’?

**The brand was known as ‘Landmark’ without the addition of the ‘Africa’ when we were in Landmark Europe. And then at some point, there was a conversation with the manager when we were raising some funds for the Landmark initiative so I wanted something monumental, something that wasn’t location specific, also something people can remember and so we arrived at the name Landmark Africa.**

1. For the sake of those who don’t know that Landmark Group of companies comprises of not just the popular Beach and Hall, can you share details of the different business entities that makes up the Landmark Africa Group and their locations?

**Most people’s touch point with Landmark is either the conventional center or the beach but Landmark is basically a business Leisure Lifestyle establishment. We have several industries; a University of Technology here in Nigeria, Health and Sport facilities, Food and Beverages brand sector (which has about 82 different retail vendors that represent different organizations), the Landmark Towers (which also has a lot of international companies seated in the building) and a lot of other businesses. Because we are a Business Leisure Lifestyle company, we have a lot that we do. And all these businesses are in the Landmark Eco system in Lagos.**

1. You have an interesting educational background, what informed your decision and how early in life did you decide on what you wanted to do?

**Have you read the book ‘Atomic Habits? The truth is nobody chooses what primary or secondary school you go to as a child, your parents do. Though we lived in London at the time, my father decided to send me to a boarding secondary school in Nigeria when I was ten years old. During my time in secondary school, I liked about two or three subjects a lot; Economics, Mathematics and Physics, I was really good with these subjects. I also loved to draw as I was very creative so I needed to study a course that was related to these subjects I was good at so I could pass easily. In addition, I’ve always loved interacting with people and loved the people who were action people; like the taxi driver, the guy who picks up the dustbin from houses, etc. So I said to myself ‘when I grow up, I want to do something action, something that makes me interact with a lot of people.’ Maybe that’s why I’m here so I’ll say this is an accident. My career choice wasn’t intentional.**

1. What has made the Landmark brand stand out from other businesses in the same field?

**I think we’ve got a deliberate strategy. Our strategy is ‘bring as many people as possible, make sure they have a great time as possible, one which nobody else can give them and then send them away to tell other people about us. We ensure that there are enough things here for them to do, that they feel special so they can bring back more people. If we do this well, it’ll be good for us and if we do it poorly, it’ll be bad. Customer treatment is about the physical and emotional treatment so it’s about what they see, what they do and how they feel. So we always try to get a balance even though we aren’t perfect but we try our best.**

1. You spent so much time abroad; schooling and working but you still decided to come home to bless the country with such facilities and services that ‘Landmark Africa’ offers. Despite the different major challenges faced by Entrepreneurs in Nigeria, Why Nigeria?

**First, I’m Nigerian. Also, the beautiful thing about life is that no matter how successful you become, what matters the most is how you’re thought of. The graveyard is full of successful people and whatever you do, there are other people doing the same, when you are home you are affecting the lives of people who are like you, people who you can relate with, people who speak the same language as you, you represent the same culture, etc. I think I got to a stage in my life in the early 2000s when I had opened offices in Europe, America and I had visited Nigeria a couple of times and this was a time a lot was changing; leadership was getting better, infrastructure was getting better, there was better exposure because of the invention of telecommunications and IT, so I felt the time was right even though there were still shortcomings in Nigeria. I was taught to always ‘find out where the people are going and get there first’ because the demographic diligence was going to turn up at that point. So I felt that was the time to come home, make an impact and influence the lives of people like me and to people who are relevant to me.**

1. You have over 25 years’ professional experience in design and execution of projects in Africa, USA and Europe. As a professional, what do you think are the major challenges the Real Estate and tourism industry is faced with at the moment and what are your recommended solutions?

**First of all, the Tourism and Real Estates industries are two different industries but they meet at a point. Real Estate is a platform for all industries. Tourism is an important industry that encompasses hospitality and leisure. Do you know that it employs one in ten people on planet earth? It’s the biggest industry for employment and the biggest industry for real change because you have different people from different countries come in everyday to explore. About the challenges; the government needs to take this industry seriously and to do this, the government needs to promote it, to promote it, the government needs to promote Nigeria abroad by creating a platform where people who want to create tourist’s attractions find it easier and more successfully. Secondly, a level of infrastructure; road, sewage, water, electricity need to be provided. As a realtor, when we build buildings, 40% of the infrastructures we build aren’t things we should be providing and that’s why charges are expensive because we end up doing things that your government should be doing for you. The third thing is finance. You can’t build these things if you don’t have access to loans and finance. It’s not a trade were you make your money back in 30 days’ time so you need sources of finance from either the government institutions. Someone said to me that the residential mortgage industry in Nigeria alone is worth 15 trillion dollars. That’ a lot but to unlock it, the government needs to unpin it so that people like you and I can have access to cheap finance so we can build properties and by this we’ll create employment and other benefits. Those are the major challenges and that’s where the rule of law comes in; contracts have to matter and have to be dealt with expediently. Lastly, security matters because no one wants to be where they aren’t secure.**

1. It’s a thing to have great dreams and it’s another thing to be able to finance the realization of the dreams. What you’ve done with ‘Landmark Africa’ must have cost a lot! While starting the brand, how were you able to finance the dream and how do you continue to finance your existing projects?

**It’s incremental. The thing about life is you do one thing, you finance it and then you make some profit and use that profit to finance some other dreams and then you keep growing. Yes, some million dollars come in but it comes in over a 25 year period. First to get finance on a business, you need to have a great idea and execute it in a way no one can. And third, it has to be bankable so you can have people saying ‘you know what? I don’t mind putting some of my money here.’ Sometimes, we are successful and sometimes we are not but keep trying.**

1. It was in the news recently that Landmark Africa secured a $24 million funding for the development of your new project, the Landmark Water View Apartments. Can you tell us more about this development projects?

**Yes, Shelter Afrique which is a Pan-African development financial institution loaned us $24 million dollars to do two things; refinance a certain debt and develop the Landmark view apartment building. The latter is a 30 floor building which is going to be the second tallest residential building in this part of Nigeria and it’s going to turn up in a way that no other building in Nigeria is. It’s going to be a business leisure lifestyle building. It’s under construction and should be ready in two and half years.**

1. One of the many great goals of Entrepreneurs is to create job opportunities for the society. What’s the workforce capacity of ‘Landmark Africa’ and how best do you source the right talent to buy into your vision of building the most visited Business, Leisure and Lifestyle Destination in Africa?

**Four thousand people work within the Landmark Eco system and about two and a half thousand people work within the frontline of the Eco system. I work with about one hundred and fifty to two hundred people directly. In terms of dreams, if you create the environment that is different from everything else then people will help. I’ll tell you something, a few years ago while I was trying to move to the next level in business, I realized that I had to find a way to train and immerse the people in the experience we wanted to create so we chartered a plane, I hired a 5 star resort and I took everybody to Dubai. It cost a fortune but I tell you in four to five years that we did that, there’s been major changes in how we not only deliver our services but in how we create our environment. Many thought I was crazy, even at the airport people were asking ‘who are you guys?’ It was a bill worth being paid.**

1. How do you define a successful Entrepreneur?

**A successful entrepreneur is one who makes a difference in other people’s lives so whatever it is you do, as long you can make a good difference in other people’s lives and these other people can tell other people about your goods and services then that’s a path to success. Because with this, comes a lot of other things you want; wealth and recognition. But a reward for good work is more work so you have the opportunity to influence more people’s lives.**

1. As a successful Entrepreneur who has spoken at notable business summits and being a judge at numerous corporate contests, what are the tips to setting up and maintaining a successful business?

**I’ll say it depends on the kind of business but first, you have to think of a really good idea and execute in a way no one has ever done. You need to be passionate and resilient and you need to prepare to fail to succeed. Those are some of the first characteristics to succeed. Secondly, your business idea needs to be bankable because people need to be able to look at it and say they like or they like the person doing it and if they are financial investors, they’ll also want to see if it’s something they can make some profit from. Thirdly, though personal, to be an entrepreneur you need to believe in what you do, have integrity and honesty because in this part of the world ‘honesty is currency.’ Honesty spreads very fast. Also, make sure the market is there because there’s no point producing the best product in the world and there’s no one to buy it. Do your research and give the market what they want and not what you want. And the last ingredient is ‘patience.’ Good things don’t happen at once or in a hurry so most times, you have to wait your time.**

1. For anyone who follows you, it may be right to say that one of your favorite quotes is that from Churchill which says “We make a Living by what we get, but make a life by what we give.” As one of the leading mixed use development firms in Nigeria, do you have any existing or future CSR projects?

**So yes, CSR is what we do because we are a community developer and what we do is to influence not just our customers but people who work for us and people who live around us. And these include; the road, electricity, sport, health and educational services are all CSR. Formally, we haven’t yet kicked off our Landmark foundation but we help and promote a lot of courses here, we do courses in Real Estate, Health and Education, we partially sponsor the University of Technology. When I look back at the biggest health challenge we’ve had in the country, COVID 19, we provided a partnership where we supported with one of the COVID centers in Lagos, we spent over a billion naira giving out to people and I like to think that we made a big difference with that.**

1. On time management, how are you effectively able to manage your businesses, sit on different boards, engage in your hobbies and make time for family and friends without being stressed?

**First, I tell people that ‘stress is a choice’ If you want to be stressed, you’ll be stressed. It’s like happiness, it’s a choice. Sometimes, I’m stressed because I choose to be stressed. In terms of time, everybody has the same 24 hours so whether you are sleeping or changing the world, everyone has the same 24 hours to do it. In life, we give our time to things that are important to us so when someone says ‘I have no time for this’ it means that it isn’t important to the person. When someone does something, don’t take their time for granted as if that’s the only thing they had to do, they are doing it because it is important to them. I use this principle to work. If it’s important to me, I make time for it, if it’s not, I try to get someone to make time for it.**

1. We’ve had a recurring collapse of buildings in Nigeria recently. What do you think the problem is and how do you recommend we prevent such from happening?

**I don’t want to be controversial but I’m going to be controversial. As a real estate developer, let’s assume it costs you a hundred units to build a building, only fifty units is actually the bricks and mortar of that building, the regulatory environment is probably twenty to thirty units, the infrastructure you are putting in is about twenty to thirty units and the things you have to do to get out of the ground and keep the regulators away cost you money and time and the value chain in real estate starts from your planning, your land, the building, the services and the finance so there’s so much that goes into the real estate that doesn’t go into the finished product. So what happens is people try to find ways to make it cheaper. The truth is if the government is reading this, they need to lower the regulatory laws and costs when it comes to the things like the cost of buying planning consents and titles and all other stuff you have to do with the government. Because it doesn’t make sense that you spend 30% percent of your cost on a shit of paper. What then happens is that by the time you get to site, you’ll get the Do-it-yourself developers who will look for ways to save money and they think they can get away with it, they don’t mix the cement well, they don’t wait for the normal duration of the building procedures and that is one of the reasons why buildings start collapsing or are badly produced as a finished product. We need to find a way to make this thing cheaper and also a way to localize it. Real Estate is a local business so you are making it for people who earn locally and if nobody can afford it, there’s no use doing it. So there’s a lot of financial stress in packaging real estate. Lastly, it’s a long-term business because when you build a building you don’t expect to make your money in four or five years. In twenty five years you are still paying loans so you expect making money over generation in twenty to thirty years. If you have this level of patience, you’ll build buildings that look nice and will last if not, you’ll have issues.**

1. Have you ever had a Breaking point in your career when you almost gave up? If yes, when was this and what keeps you going?

**Every day I have Breaking points. There are difficult situations because business is about people and there are different things you need to do to motivate people around you to buy into the dream and work hard and deliberately enough to realize the dream. And every time you deal with people you have a breaking point because some people are good, some are not so good and some are bad. And across the value chain you can’t change people and you need to rely on people to achieve the goal. The most difficult challenge is dealing with people. In life, we need to stop pretending that life is easy because it’s hard, we have so many variables that we have no control about so it’s tough. But having breaking points doesn’t mean you break and that’s why I talked about resilience being a feature of a successful entrepreneur. There’s a quote on my wall in my office that says ‘”If you want something you’ve never had, you’ve got to be prepared to do something you’ve never done.” As for what keeps me going, I’ll say because my motivation is success, this keeps me going. I want to see people happy and even though it’s not easy to make people happy, I need to keep trying.**

1. So far amidst all the uncountable achievements you’ve had, what will you regard as your greatest achievement?

**My two children! (Laughs) I say this because I have the biggest influence on my family. I was probably the least hardworking person in my family though. But from a business point of view, I think it’s developing the Landmark brand especially in a continent as Africa, in a country as hard as Nigeria and in a city as hard Lagos. We welcome between 20-30 thousand people every day to the Landmark Eco system. Being here watching people happy also brings a lot of pride.**

1. So many marriages have crashed while the parties blame it on either one partner being too invested in his or career but you do a lot and seem like a family oriented man. What is the secret to being a career person while maintaining a successful marriage?

**You should ask my wife this though. But like I said earlier, you have 24 hours in a day and you give attention to what is important. Time is about what you put into the hours and it’s not the hours that count. I take my family, friends and colleagues seriously and when I have to put time into something I put quality time into it. Marriage is a different topic entirely because I think it’s about people and it takes two to tangle. If two people have enough flexibility, energy and desire to make it work, then it’ll work. We’ve put a lot into our marriage and hopefully, we’ll get a lot out of it.**

1. What do you do to relax?

**Well, I’m living my dream so I’m relaxing all the time. I’m a Business Leisure Lifestyle Brand so every time I’m in business, I’m in leisure as well and I’m living a lifestyle.**

1. If you were not into Real Estates, what other career paths do you think you’ll thrive in?

**It’s a deep question. I’ve spent forty years or more of my life in this industry so I’ve done nothing else than this business. But I’m actually good at interacting with people, so if I wasn’t doing buildings, I’ll be finding ways to deal with people. Also, I have lectured before so I can do something that has to do with education, and maybe being a tour guide or being a Presenter.**

1. What are some of the future goals for ‘Landmark Africa’?

**Currently, we are the fastest growing Leisure Lifestyle destination brand in the West African coast; we’ll like to be the number one business lifestyle platform in Africa. That’s our ultimate goal. Also, as I stated earlier, we are about to build the Water view apartment block and hopefully it will transform the way people interact in this Eco System. We are looking to build a twenty thousand seats indoor arena and hopefully that’ll put Lagos on the map and we can then host international events whether sporting events like; boxing, football, tennis or even international concerts where local or international musicians can hold shows. When these are ready, we’ll hopefully make a difference. Also, we are looking to do some experiential stuff. Some people might have heard about the Dubai or London Aisle that has skylines, wheels and all sorts. We are also hoping to do something like this. We think it will change the experiential flavor of what most people come to do at Landmark.**

1. What’s your advice to Entrepreneurs who see you as their mentor and want to become a successful entrepreneur sometime in future?

**In very simple statements, good old fashioned principles, embrace: hard work, integrity, dedication, perseverance, and find out what your super power is. What is that thing that when you do, it births exceptional results? Do it! So many people go to the grave without knowing what their super power is. The number one thing is to know what your super power is and then use these old fashioned principles to promote your super power and influence the lives of other people. Because when you influence other people’s lives, you influence your own life too.**

1. For people who would like to connect with you and Landmark on social media, where can they find you?

**I’m on Instagram, Linkedin and Twitter @PAULONWUANIBE**