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SOWETO GOLD: BUILDING AN ICONIC CRAFT BEER BRAND

Tendai Mhizha, Anthony Wilson-Prangley, and Danie Petzer wrote this case solely to provide material for class discussion. The authors do not intend to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The authors may have disguised certain names and other identifying information to protect confidentiality.

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In 2016, Ndumiso Madlala stood outside his brewery and looked across the nearby Klipspruit River toward the small houses and vibrant streets of Soweto. He reflected on the business he and his business partner, Josef Schmid, had created. He had recently shared with the U.S.-based PBS NewsHour that “Whenever I drive to work, I think how wonderful it is that we are starting the first microbrewery in a township.”[[1]](#footnote-1) He thought about his father, who was proud of what Soweto Gold was doing. He knew that his father’s generation had faced significant hardship and that there was a long historical context to his success. The early brand building had gone well. However, now he wondered how he could grow the market for these brands. There were two questions that faced the team.

First, the location of the brewery in Orlando West, Soweto, limited their expansion. Deliveries both to and especially from the brewery were expensive because it was off the major trucking routes and an added distance from their main distribution hubs and markets. There had been challenges on-site in trying to expand production. Madlala and Schmid began to debate whether they could contract out the brewing of their beer to a larger contract brewing company outside the township. They knew, for example, that Guinness was brewed in 60 countries but still retained its association with Ireland.

Second, they still had not really tapped into the growing black middle class and had not managed to convince large numbers of women to drink craft beer. They wondered how to better reach these markets. They wanted to cement the brands in the minds of consumers. They wanted to keep acting boldly but avoid making mistakes that would cost them in the long run.

the idea

Madlala worked as a utilities and brewing manager for Heineken NV (Heineken) in Johannesburg, South Africa, until 2011, when one small moment unexpectedly changed his career direction. That year, Heineken sent Madlala on an advanced brewing course in Burton-on-Trent, London, a neighbourhood famous for beer brewing. On the opening morning of his course, he found his British classmates were from very small family-owned breweries. “They were brewing tiny volumes, while my brewery was geared up for two million hectolitres.” During the course, it dawned on him that his classmates were really having fun brewing small batches of beer. He wondered, “What if I took exactly what they are doing and did it back home?”

On the long flight back home, Madlala thought more about the idea of starting his own brewery. He wondered about locating the brewery in Soweto, the sprawling residential area outside Johannesburg. In South Africa, it was seen as a place of possibility. He wondered if this was a crazy idea and whether he had what it would take to create a new beer brand.

Madlala’s upbringing and early career

Madlala was born in 1979 into a large Zulu family in Elandskop, a rural village in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. His father was a sailor, and his mother a nurse. His parents raised him and his six siblings in a caring but competitive home environment. To motivate their children, his parents would offer the child with the best school grades the best part of the chicken at dinner. His elder sister usually got the best pieces while Madlala, despite working hard, never got there. This sister inspired him to keep studying, especially when she became one of the first women in the village to get a university degree.

Madlala attended St. Francis High School, a locally renowned Roman Catholic school where Steve Biko, the black consciousness activist, and Benedict Vilakazi, the poet and intellectual, had studied years before. With top exam marks during his final year, he secured a bursary from Sasol Limited (Sasol)—a large South African chemical and energy company—to study chemical engineering at a nearby university. There, he thrived academically, completing his undergraduate degree with excellent final results. He received a new scholarship from Sasol to complete his master’s degree in chemical engineering at the highly ranked University of Twente in the Netherlands.

In 2003, in his second year of the master’s program, he started a project to improve the use of synthetic membranes for beer purification. He visited his first brewery that year in Bavaria. There, he looked at how to improve an existing purification system originally developed by a company called Norit NV. The improved system was so successful that the technology was bought later that year by South African Breweries (SAB)—a subsidiary of SABMiller PLC—at the time the second-largest brewing company in the world.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Madlala came back to South Africa to complete his master’s degree while helping SAB implement the filtration system. When he graduated, he spent a year at Sasol as part of his bursary agreement. Then he was hired by SAB into a permanent position as a production manager in the growing market for fruit-based alcoholic drinks. A few years later, in 2008, Heineken hired him to help implement his system at a new brewery Heineken was building outside Johannesburg.

A FORK IN THE ROAD

A few years later, in 2011, on his return flight from London and the advanced brewing course, Madlala could not stop thinking about the idea of starting his own brewery. He wondered particularly about locating the brewery in Soweto. Soweto had well over a million people.[[3]](#footnote-3) In the context of a democratic South Africa, it was seen as a place of hope and possibility. Nobel Peace Prize winners Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu had both lived there. It was also well known among international visitors; whenever his Dutch friends visited him in South Africa, all they wanted to do was hang out there. He remembered how, at a well-known Soweto restaurant named Wandies Place, his European former classmates would always want to sample the local township beer. They would be surprised and disappointed to find the only beers available were mainstream commercial lagers.

Madlala started to research the craft brewing industry and began to see an opportunity for independent, entrepreneurial brewers. At a local brewing conference, a friend showed him some research stating that two new craft breweries were opening every month in South Africa. He wanted to create a mid-sized brewery to produce a beer that would compete on price with SAB’s mainstream beers, which had over 90 per cent of the market share.[[4]](#footnote-4) He hoped to steal some of the market share by targeting the large Soweto market and then grow from there.

Madlala began to talk about the idea every night at home and among his friends. They encouraged him. However, his wife was concerned about the risks of the new adventure. He was the main income earner at home, looking after her and their three-year-old daughter. He had a hefty home mortgage and monthly car payments. At age 32, he was also part of the first generation of black South Africans who were living in a free democratic country. His corporate salary could help lift him and his family into a secure financial position that would help him support his daughter and later generations. Starting a whole new business would mean resigning from his job and cashing in his safety net—his pension—to use for the start-up phase.

Yet, the idea gnawed at him. He knew he was a skilled brewer, and he had helped build a large brewery already. The craft brewing industry was growing fast, and he felt ready. “This is the moment,” he thought. “I can do this.” So he planned his resignation from Heineken. However, then he got a text message from his elder sister. She pleaded with him to reconsider, reminding him he was the single breadwinner at home. She made him feel selfish for quitting, reminding him that even his daughter’s nanny relied on his stable salary to feed her own five kids. “There are so many people dependent on you,” she wrote. Madlala sat with the phone in his hand and wondered whether he should reconsider his impending resignation.

CHASing the DREAM

Though Madlala received a warning from his successful older sister not to quit his job, the pull he felt to set up a new brewing company in Soweto was too strong. He resigned from Heineken in June 2011. “It was purely out of excitement,” he recalled. “There was nothing in front of me, no promise of funding.” Heineken managers were generous as he handed in his resignation and said that if things did not work out, he would be welcomed back. This gave him some comfort. He cashed in his pension fund and leapt into the unknown.

Newly unemployed, he spent his days working on a business plan and shopping around for funding. There was a well-known investor who was looking to finance a large brewery. Madlala felt convinced that this man would back him and his idea, so a month after leaving Heineken, he arranged for a meeting and told the investor his plans. However, he was too late. “What a punch in my stomach,” he recalled. “The guy had already committed everything he had in a new R300 million[[5]](#footnote-5) brewing project.” The door he had been counting on was closed.

Madlala had to keep going. He looked around for other funding options and searched for potential locations in Soweto. Things moved more slowly than he expected. July passed, then August, then September. He was burning through his savings but had nothing to show for it. He started to doubt his idea and began to consider his options. He took his old boss out to dinner in hopes of going back to Heineken. He was devastated to find out that changes in the company meant there was no longer space for him. Then he heard something about a job in Nigeria, an eight-hour plane ride away. However, his wife was reluctant to move the family to a new country on the other side of the continent.

Options seemed to dry up. There was nothing out there. As a last resort, Madlala went back to SAB and asked if they might have a position available. They did. There was a management job at a nearby brewery that would allow him and his family to stay in Johannesburg. Madlala considered the offer. It was a good one, and it meant he would be able to draw a regular paycheque again for the first time in four months. But it would also be a kind of failure. He would be giving up on his dream of being an entrepreneur.

A DREAM DEFFERED

In late 2011, Madlala decided to take the SAB position. For a few months, he was relieved and convinced himself that letting go of his dream had been the right decision. However, in early 2012, he met a group of prominent business leaders who had an idea for a massive new development in Soweto that would include a restaurant, jazz club, recording studio, and brewery. Madlala recalled thinking, “They described my brewery vision and everything I’d been thinking about over the last year.” Suddenly, his dream was alive again.

This time, Madlala was more cautious. He was not going to quit his corporate job right away. Over the next two years, he continued to work at SAB and met from time to time with the new project team. He joined SAB’s Africa division, working as a utilities consultant for 25 breweries across 14 countries. He travelled extensively and built three new breweries.

More than building breweries, Madlala learned how to create brands. Specifically, he was involved in the creation and launch of White Bull, a profitable new beer developed for consumers in South Sudan. He realized the power of brand development among specific communities. “The white bull is an important symbol for local people in South Sudan,” he recalled. “It made me realize the idea I had always had to leverage the symbolism of Soweto was still a good idea.”

The potential partners for the new restaurant were moving slowly. No one seemed willing to commit. There were big dreams of becoming beer barons, but no financial commitment. Then, in early 2013, Madlala got a call from Schmid, one of the people he had met through the venture.

Schmid was born in Stockholm, Sweden, to Austrian immigrant parents. After his formal schooling in Sweden, he studied business and hotel management in Switzerland and eventually spent 19 years traveling and working as a hospitality executive. In 1997, Schmid was transferred to be a director at the Hyatt Regency hotel in Rosebank, Johannesburg. He decided to make the city his home. The idea of creating a sustainable township business and building a strong national—and eventually international—brand was alluring. He was excited to create a world-class, export-ready product. When Schmid met Madlala, he knew he had found a perfect fellow entrepreneur.

Madlala recalled Schmid saying, “We are not moving forward. Let’s break out on our own and do this thing slightly differently.” Schmid believed that there was little appetite to fund a massive string of restaurant complexes. His suggestion to Madlala was that the two of them join a new company that focused only on the beer and let that drive the business. Madlala was convinced. He and Schmid registered a new company. Then they wrote a business plan aimed at attracting the support of one key investor, the Industrial Development Corporation (IDC), a major South African development finance institution.

BUILDING A BRAND

Madlala wanted Schmid to buy into his original idea: brewing a mainstream, affordable beer in Soweto they could call Soweto Pride, inspired by a beer called London Pride. Madlala believed they could go head to head with the big commercial beer brewers. However, over a series of meetings, Schmid opened Madlala’s eyes to the risks of going up against the big players, especially SAB. SAB was founded in 1895 and controlled more than 90 per cent of the South African beer market with a few very strong beer brands.[[6]](#footnote-6) A few years earlier, it had acquired the Miller Brewing Company, a large American brewer, and had been renamed SABMiller; it had operations in 75 countries[[7]](#footnote-7) and global revenue of US$31.3 billion in 2013.[[8]](#footnote-8) Schmid felt the fledgling company would not be able to compete against SAB’s brands, its distribution channels, and its efficiencies of scale.

The two partners started thinking about positioning their beer differently. They decided to brew a niche craft beer. Craft beer was already a growing global trend. In South Africa, it constituted less than 1.0 per cent of the total beer market—much less than the 7.8 per cent it represented in the United States at the time.[[9]](#footnote-9) However, it was growing fast from this low base, so they decided to brew a super-premium craft beer that would be brewed in Soweto but aimed at the broader middle- and upper-middle-class market.

They called their new beer Soweto Gold, drawing on the rich cultural history of Soweto and the history of gold mining in the area. South Africa held 50 per cent of the world’s gold deposits, and mining had drawn people to the region for over a century. Also, the word “Soweto” was evocative. Beyond being the former home of two Nobel Peace Prize winners, Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, it was the cultural home of countless South African politicians, musicians, writers, intellectuals, and activists. The sprawling residential area was the home of South Africa’s two largest soccer teams, and the Soweto Derby regularly drew crowds of more than 90,000 local fans. It was also where many in the emerging black middle class had been born and raised.

In 2013, this black middle class was a growing demographic. Under the repressive, brutally enforced system of legislated racial segregation known as Apartheid, black South Africans had had few rights. However, since 1994, many black South Africans had found new opportunities in business and government. Some had started their own companies as an emerging generation of entrepreneurs. It was an aspirational and changing group of potential customers, with 76 per cent coming from poverty or working class origins.[[10]](#footnote-10) Over the previous nine years, it had more than doubled to 5.5 million people.[[11]](#footnote-11) Black South Africans now constituted 58 per cent of the broader middle class (see Exhibit 1).

As Madlala and Schmid travelled the country visiting a range of craft breweries, they found that the existing market for such beer was mostly made up of young, white men, often categorized as “hipsters.” They saw the homogenous existing demographic as an opportunity. “Wouldn’t it be cool if we filled these kinds of places with the black middle class?” they thought. Madlala had also found that many women drank beer in Europe, quite unlike in South Africa, where women mostly drank wine and alcoholic fruit drinks. He wondered if they could convert more women to drinking their new craft beer.

Madlala started making pots of beer in his kitchen, trying to find the magic recipe for a “muted” bitterness that would appeal to a broad palate. Meanwhile, Schmid worked on the marketing and brand strategy. They developed a logo with a fist raised to the sky, alluding to a powerful symbol of the struggle for freedom during the Apartheid years. When Madlala received feedback from a trusted uncle that the logo was too provocative and antagonistic, he considered scrapping it. However, Schmid pushed back. He felt the icon of a raised fist was entirely appropriate. They were trying to revolutionize beer drinking in South Africa. They wanted to create a movement. The raised fist honoured the past struggle for freedom and, at the same time, suggested the hand-crafted nature of the beer (see Exhibit 2).

In June 2013, while Madlala was still working at SAB, he and Schmid presented their concept for a new beer brand to the IDC. The finance company was impressed and said it was willing to support the venture. With momentum building, Madlala took leave from work. He and Schmid flew to China to look at brewing equipment. While in the boardroom of their potential suppliers, Schmid whispered in Madlala’s ear, “I am going to borrow some money from my family. We are going to do this.” They committed then and there to pay the deposit on the new equipment.

“That was the moment,” Madlala recalled. As soon as he landed back in South Africa, he opened up with SAB about his new venture. He was willing to explore the option of partnering with them, but they said no. So in September 2013, Madlala gave up on the security of a corporate salary for a second time.

Schmid and Madlala were so anxious to get started that, even before the equipment arrived, they arranged to brew a test batch through an established brewer on Nottingham Road, near Madlala’s home village, 500 kilometres from Soweto. Madlala considered his journey to this point. He knew how to brew beer but was still learning how to build a brand. He wondered if this departure from corporate life would be any different from the last one.

TAKING THE PRODUCT TO THE MARKET

In September 2013, when the first batch of contract-brewed Soweto Gold was ready, it was transported nearly 500 kilometres to Soweto. Madlala and Schmid called the newspapers and arranged a free tasting at Nambitha, a well-known up-market restaurant in the township. The next day, they were on the front page of the local newspaper. There had been many anxious days and sleepless nights, but now the outlook was positive.

Then, in early October, they formally launched their beer at the 2013 Soweto Beer Festival. This event was hugely important in building momentum. Before the festival, they were profiled by eNCA, a leading South African news organization. Other interviews followed. Madlala recalls that “the story aired and it drummed up a lot of interest in the brand and the festival.” At the festival, they were positioned next to the SAB and Heineken brands. They managed to sell significant volumes. “It gave us the confidence to go out there and sell to restaurants that didn’t have our brand.”

In their own minds, there were three reasons why people would relate to the brand and buy the beer. The first was what was on the outside of the bottle: the name. They believed Soweto Gold was a winning name and that the emotional association was compelling. The other two reasons had to do with what was inside the bottle. The quality of the product would need to be excellent. Madlala had years of international brewing experience and was confident in their ability to deliver a quality offering. The initial feedback was that the beer was too sweet, so Madlala adjusted the recipe for the second batch. They believed that this one had a winning taste. Finally, they knew that customers wanted the beer itself to be brewed in Soweto.

Since they had a thin marketing plan and no budget, they focused on directly asking restaurants to stock the beer. A number of restaurants were enthusiastic, and it was these initial partners that emphasized the importance of the beer being Soweto-brewed to ensure an authentic connection between the brand and the beer itself. They leased a large area of Ubuntu Kraal, a well-known events and conferencing venue in Soweto. When the brewing equipment arrived from China a few months later, they built their brewery there. Finally, in June 2014, three years after conceiving the idea and seven months after Madlala had left corporate employment for the second time, a Soweto-brewed Soweto Gold lager was available for sale.

Madlala and Schmid remained committed to building a unisex beer with muted bitterness. They wanted to position it differently from the heavy hop beers that were common in the craft beer market. They developed a taste that they hoped would be easy to enjoy on a hot day or cool evening. They described Soweto Gold as a “superior premium craft lager” that was “a dark golden medium-bodied beer with the slightest hoppy fruitiness, low bitterness, and a light rounded smooth caramel finish.” They began to brew and distribute their first batches.

Business expanded rapidly, but they still sought ways to innovate with ideas for two new products that could be brewed with the same equipment: alcoholic fruit-flavoured beer and ginger beer. They called the fruity beer “Soweto Gold Apple Ale” and identified it with a logo similar to Soweto Gold’s. They aimed the ale at a younger early-20s demographic, which had a preference for a drink that was sweeter than beer. They described it in their communications as comprising the “tangy sweet kiss of the forbidden fruit” with a “naughty appley bite.”

The alcoholic ginger beer brand was inspired by *gogo*—a loving term for “grandmother.” During the difficult years of Apartheid, when local brewing was illegal, elderly women and gogos would often brew beer and other drinks, including ginger beer. These women were known to be strong and brave. They were loved for the way they brought people together despite the country’s troubles. Madlala and Schmid developed a brand that connected people with a nostalgia for these women and specifically the 1950s, when integrated, culturally vibrant neighbourhoods still existed and people played and danced to the upbeat, jazzy Kwela music of the day. The logo included a woman with a large “afro,” dressed in an elegant red dress, in a style reminiscent of the time.

Business expanded rapidly and successfully. The partners received significant positive media attention despite the fact the business was rarely breaking even. At the end of 2015, they realized they would not be able to handle the peak volumes associated with the summer holiday period. To resolve this problem, they bought four new fermenters of 4,000 litres each. This added an additional 30,000-litre brewing capacity. They re-engineered the plant, and invested in new pumps and new lines. They ended up with a brewery with a new capacity for 60,000 litres.

They were now ready and started producing for the peak season. However, before long, they received a number of recalls from the market. The beer was no longer of the same consistent standard. They had carefully measured their cooling requirements, but the summer heat and open sun on the new fermenters had interfered with the process. The confidence in the brand was dented, and they needed to act quickly.

Madlala felt that “You always hear from other people that you should not grow too fast, so that for me is something I got to understand first hand.” They had to make a tough call. They decided to take out the additional capacity, focusing on the system they had originally bought. However, they were now limited in their ability to meet demand.

They rebuilt trust with customers by brewing a unique Soweto Gold Cherry Ale and gave out kegs to customers for free. This speciality beer was so good that customers started buying it, and they were able to convince the customers to take the lager again.

By the end of the first quarter of 2016, just over 18 months after opening the brewery, they employed 12 people full-time in production and three more in sales and marketing. They were distributing to 120 restaurants on a regular basis. They also started building a larger bottling facility to be able to sell to liquor stores locally and globally. They produced 15,000 litres a month on average, with a peak production of 25,000 litres per month during the peak summer period. They were already one of the largest craft breweries in the country and hoped to expand significantly (see Exhibit 3).

Madlala and Schmid had achieved great success in building a premium set of brands. In early 2016, they won the Township Entrepreneur of the Year award, which brought in R300,000[[12]](#footnote-12) and was used to improve their operations. They received significant free publicity with articles in *Forbes* and on CNN, PBS, and Channel NewsAsia. They were also profiled through the local news media: SABC, eTV, Talk 702, and the *Financial Mail*.

Exhibit 1: Rise of the first generation of middle class in South Africa

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| **Ethnicity/Race** | **South African Middle Class**  **(Total of 10.4 million)** | **First Generation Middle Class**  **(Total of 4.7 million)** |
| Black | 58% | 76% |
| Other | 14% | 11% |
| Indian | 6% | 6% |
| Caucasian | 22% | 8% |

Source: “South Africa’s First Generation Middle Class,” FutureFact, March 12, 2014, accessed May 2, 2017, www.futurefact.co.za/futurefact/south-africa%E2%80%99s-first-generation-middle-class.

Exhibit 2: Soweto Gold logo



Source: Company documents.

Exhibit 3: Data on the larger craft brewery brands in South Africa

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Company Name** | **Location** | **Established** | **Number of Products** | **Facebook Likes** | **Twitter Followers** | **Website Address** |
| Jack Black’s Brewing Co. | Cape Town, Western Cape | 2007 | 4 | 9,504 | 9,087 | [www.jackblackbeer.com](http://www.jackblackbeer.com) |
| Mitchell’s Brewery | Knysna, Western Cape | 1983 | 7 | 51 | 1,226 | [www.mitchellsbrewing.com](http://www.mitchellsbrewing.com) |
| Boston Breweries | Cape Town, Western Cape | 2000 | 7 | 3,548 | 3,086 | [www.bostonbreweries.co.za](http://www.bostonbreweries.co.za) |
| Darling Brewery | Darling, Western Cape | post-2007 | 12 | 4,378 | 7,808 | [www.darlingbrew.co.za](http://www.darlingbrew.co.za) |
| Cape Brewing Company | Paarl, Western Cape | 2012 | 9 | 39,397 | 7,184 | [www.capebrewing.co.za](http://www.capebrewing.co.za) |
| Ubuntu Kraal Brewery | Soweto, Gauteng | 2013 | 5 | 1,487 | 2,500 | [www.sowetogold.co.za](http://www.sowetogold.co.za) |

Source: University of Pretoria, Gordon Institute of Business Science, MBA 2016 elective class research from company websites, Facebook, and Twitter.

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3. “Soweto,” South African History Online, March 20 2017, accessed May 5, 2017, www.sahistory.org.za/places/soweto. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. SABMiller, “SAB Miller: Investor Relations: Quarterly Divisional Seminar Series, South Africa,” March 2014, accessed May 5, 2017, www.ab-inbev.com/content/dam/universaltemplate/ab-inbev/investors/sabmiller/presentation/divisional-seminars/quarterly-divisional-seminar-south-africa-2014.pdf. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. R = ZAR = South African rand; all currency amounts are in R unless otherwise specified; R1.00 = US$0.15 on January 4, 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. SABMiller, op. cit. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Kitwe and Onitsha, op. cit. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Margaret Sutherland and Tashmia Ismail, *Beer for All: SABMiller in Mozambique* (London, ON: Ivey Publishing, 2014). Available from Ivey Publishing, product no. 9B14M026. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Nick Hedley, “Burgeoning Craft-Beer Trend Is Good News for Sector,” Business Day Live, April 29, 2014, accessed May 2, 2017,

   https://www.businesslive.co.za/bd/companies/retail-and-consumer/2014-03-18-burgeoning-craft-beer-trend-is-good-news-for-sector/; Brewers Association, “Brewers Association Announces 2013 Craft Brewer Growth,” Brewers Association, March 13, 2014, accessed May 2, 2017, https://www.brewersassociation.org/press-releases/brewers-association-announces-2013-craft-brewer-growth/. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. “South Africa’s First Generation Middle Class,” FutureFact, March 12, 2014, accessed May 2, 2017, www.futurefact.co.za/futurefact/south-africa%E2%80%99s-first-generation-middle-class. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. US$1 = R14.77 on April 1, 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)