

IvoryNG

A Lifestyle...Expanding Possibilities



IvoryNG.com

A Lifestyle...Expanding Possibilities

DECEMBER 2016



Segun Agbaje

On his new found love for the fashion industry

GT Bank is committed to growing SMEs

- Segun Agbaje

Guaranty Trust Bank Plc has consistently played a leading role in Africa's banking industry. Regarded by industry watchers as one of the best run financial institutions, the bank is considered a role model within the financial service industry. Little wonder it has continued to pioneer initiatives that were hitherto not associated with banking. Having made inroads into the food and drink industry with its GT Bank Food and Drink Weekend, a food exhibition and sales event aimed at projecting the diverse angles of the food industry, as well as in the Arts sector with the launch of its Virtual Arts Gallery, ART, created to reignite interest in African art and drive the growth and development of the local art industry, the bank decided to take on another industry, the fashion industry, with the debut edition of the GTBank Fashion Weekend. The two-day consumer focused event created an ultimate fashion experience where the most promising and talented retail brands showcased the latest fashion trends and products to a large and diverse audience of consumers, fashion aficionados and industry professionals. Like the food fair and art gallery, the GTBank Fashion Weekend, is part of the bank's long history of supporting the local fashion industry. Having sponsored two of the country's leading fashion events, The ARISE fashion week and The Lagos Fashion and Design Week, for a combined period of five years, the bank is set to leave an extensive footprint in the fashion industry. In this interview with the Lifestyle/Editorial Director, Nkarenayi Ukonu, the MD of the bank, Segun Agbaje, talks more on the bank's vision for the evolving fashion industry.

Why is Guaranty Trust bank getting involved in the fashion business? First it was the food and drink business and later the arts, now it is fashion. What is the correlation between banking and fashion?

What we are trying to do is build Small Medium Enterprises. If you look at the rest of the world, say a country like Italy for example, SMEs really control their economy. In Nigeria, the biggest businesses are the SMEs which is why we decided to be associated with SMEs. However, seeing that SME is a general thing, we choose to pick certain industries to support which we think are quite popular and have a lot of Nigerians doing amazing things. We discovered that there are quite a lot of young talented Nigerians in the food and drink industry, either in agriculture, food processing, fast food etc. So we decided to create a platform to support them. Not just pay lip service to them but to actually create a platform for them to excel by supporting them with loans when we understand their cash flows and put them on our market hub among other things. But that is the easy part. The difficult part is to create the necessary infrastructure for them which is where we will end up. An infrastructure that they can share and employ the economy of scales of big companies. The second industry which we have picked that is quite popular is the fashion industry and until now, I didn't quite know that there were many facets to it. There is the retail aspect, the production aspect, the cosmetics aspect which is quite huge, the aso oke and adire business etc. So we gave some selected SMEs in the fashion business and gave them a platform as good as any in the world where they can showcase their brands at the fashion weekend. We didn't charge them a dime for that. We also created the master classes for capacity building and for



people to learn from other's experiences at no cost. So we are not just into food and drink or fashion exhibitions but in an initiative that will assist in unlocking growth opportunities for businesses in these industries. We could have added other industries as well but I have since come to learn that it isn't quite a good idea to take on too many things so we chose to concentrate on food and drinks, arts and fashion and see how far we can really go with it. We are thrilled to be the first in the Nigerian financial sector to pioneer this. We believe we have a fundamental responsibility to ensure that SMEs have the necessary tools to achieve success within the global economy. We will use our strength, global reach, expertise and relationships to make a positive impact for our customers and invariably our communities. We are committed to growing SMEs in a sustainable manner that is not driven by profits but focused on empowering our customers and growing our economy collectively.



What is in it for your organisation?

I can lie and tell you nothing but hopefully and ultimately, they will become my customers as we build their businesses. We are building SMEs for the future just as we have built retail but having said that, I promise you there is an altruistic thing about this. I think we have a duty to build small businesses. We have been blessed and have been very fortunate as a bank to be successful and I think when you are in a country, a continent as ours and you are successful, you really should give something back. So even if there was nothing in this for us, we would still have dabbled into it.

There are quite a number of brands still upcoming, struggling and not as well known as some of the brands that participated at the fashion weekend. What are your plans to create an enabling environment for them to quickly become widely known brands?

We actually got a applications from lots of brands but reserved a certain portion for those who were on the website and a certain portion for those on our market hub, those who are more established. We will continue to explore ways to make them grow. This isn't a one off thing for us. We plan to do this every year and hopefully reach more and more of the smaller ones.

Between now and say next year when you have another edition of the fashion weekend, in what ways do you plan to empower the SMEs you have identified with today?

Besides loans and featuring them on our market hub like I did mention, we hope and pray that we can create for them, alliances with developmental agencies because in the world today, there are so many developmental agencies that have products targeted at fashion. So if we can help them access it, hopefully that will be it. Like I said, the ultimate goal is create infrastructure that

they can share. It is very challenging but hopefully we can make it happen.

When you talk of shared infrastructure, it reminds one of the Saville Row community in London. Are we looking at the possibility of that sort of infrastructure happening in Nigeria?
Absolutely. My dream is to for example, build the factory that makes say shirts, trousers. It will almost be like contract sharing. If you are into ties, they get them ready for you in about three, four hours, put your own label on it, you, go.



Someone else comes in to sew shirts or trousers, they put their own label, they go. That is what happens everywhere in the world. The person who makes one particular kind of shirt, does another and all they do is change the label. Same factory. It allows economy of scale and allows you to operate bigger because you don't have overhead cost.

What are you working on next?

I simply want to consolidate on the areas we have made inroads into. I want to have a better food and drink exhibition, a better fashion weekend, a digital platform, we haven't even started. I tell people to just continue watching us, we are just starting.

If you weren't a banker, what other profession would you have dabbled into?

I would still be a banker. My father was a banker, I have always wanted to be a banker all my life but I think my definition of banking for me has changed over the years having been in it for 26 years. I really think what Guaranty Trust Bank is today and has become, is the platform for enriching lives. We have to give people a platform to excel. At whatever you do, we will provide the platform, we will give you the best and let you run with it. Nigerians are very talented people that if you give them the right platform, they will continue to do wonderful things. I really don't see myself as just a banker but rather as the CEO of a business enterprise. So we are trying to project ourselves as more than a traditional bank.

What do you like most about your job?

I love everything about it. I love the fact that we are in the food and fashion business, that we are part of several young millennia who are working so passionate and whose lives we are touching just by what we are doing. I mean I can't think of any other thing I would rather be doing.

Now that you have dabbled into the fashion industry, would you consider yourself fashionable?

I am not very fashionable. Bankers are very boring people. I have a wife who is an interior decorator, who is more fashionable than I am. As you have noticed, I am not someone who is out there a lot, I am always in my office working. I live a bit of a private life.

What has life taught you as a person?

Life has taught me to be very humble, to trust completely in God and to believe that absolutely nothing is impossible if you work hard, pray hard and surround yourself with the right people.