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Entrepreneur Launches Textile Import Business and Fulfills Her Dream

This startup learned to import, price, and sell her *foutas* with help from the SBDC.

Ellie Montazeri knew she wanted to use her creative passion and her background in international relations to create something she could call her own. Montazeri lived in various countries including Japan, France, and Singapore. While living and working abroad, she had the opportunity to work with organizations like UNESCO Paris and volunteer with United Nations Women, Singapore. While in Singapore, she noticed many expatriate women importing products from home that they couldn't find in their adopted country. Time later spent in Tunisia along with spiritual direction and reflection led to the birth of a dream. When Montazeri and her family finally moved to Los Angeles, the ideas came together in the *fouta*—a traditional Tunisian cloth that doubles as a throw, tablecloth, shawl or picnic blanket.

Challenges

Importing and selling *foutas* made by artisans in Africa offered a way for Montazeri to bring together her international experience and her entrepreneurial spirit. However, since Montazeri did not have any prior business experience, she turned to her friends for some guidance, one of whom suggested she visit the Small Business Development Center hosted by El Camino College.

INDUSTRY

Textile

CHALLENGES

- Licenses, permits, accounting
- Import agent identification and distribution strategies
- Hiring employees

SOLUTIONS

- Business planning and accounting assistance
- Import agent referrals and distribution assessment
- Internship program

CLIENT IMPACT

- Launched business and met financial projections for first year in business



Small Business Development Center hosted by El Camino College
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“They’re connected, they’re concerned and they want to see you do well. To have these kind souls around you — it’s a special relationship. You feel like someone is taking your hand and showing you the way.”

Ellie Montazeri, Founder
Balthazar & Rose



Best Advice

SBDC Business Advisors Charlie Lowe, Dan Hancuff, Nathaniel Jemison and Lawrence Johnson guided Montazeri in every step of starting her business, including obtaining the necessary licenses, permits and trademark; finding an agent to help her import her products; learning to manage business finances and pricing her product.

Follow the Road Map

Montazeri recalls one of her first meetings with Lowe: “I had both kids with me, and they were crawling around and complaining, but he was so encouraging!” Lowe explained all the steps involved in launching a company, including naming the business, opening a business bank account, registering the business with the city, paying taxes and more. She especially valued the SBDC’s guidance on licenses and permits, such as the need to obtain a seller’s permit before purchasing product to avoid certain taxes. Learning this information gave her “a boost of confidence,” she recalls.

Making Connections

Importing goods from overseas was an intimidating prospect for Montazeri, “trust was my biggest issue,” she says. “You don’t know the quality [from] the samples — one order could be fine, but the next order might not be.”

Lowe, who is an import specialist, discussed the risks of importing and each of the steps involved. “He made suggestions like finding a reputable company as my broker and agent for help clearing customs,” Montazeri says. Lowe also connected her with other nonprofit organizations in downtown L.A.’s fashion and textile center that help small businesses, and suggested potential

markets where she could sell her foutas. “Charlie talked a lot about the importance of relationships and meeting people face-to-face,” says Montazeri, and with his guidance, she has gradually built strong relationships with suppliers in Africa.

Get Help

Montazeri consulted Hancuff about the legal issues involved in hiring employees. Since Montazeri’s budget wouldn’t allow for a full-time employee, Hancuff suggested she bring on an intern.

“Internships are a great way for small businesses to get help,” says Montazeri, pointing out that interns are often highly qualified in their industries. She credits the intern she hired through a local fashion school with teaching her a lot about stock, inventory, formatting invoices and other day-to-day aspects of running her business.

Of course, it’s the help from the SBDC that Montazeri values most. “They’re connected, they’re concerned and they want to see you do well. To have these kind souls around you — it’s a special relationship.”

CLIENT IMPACT

Since trademarking her business name in mid-2014, Montazeri has begun selling her products on the Balthazar & Rose website as well as in several Southern California boutiques.

In addition to expanding to more retail outlets, Montazeri’s future plans include importing a wider variety of artisanal products from Tunisia, such as hoodies, bathrobes and related products. She has also begun selling U.S.-made soaps, and has brought on a friend as a business partner.

