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High heels and high hopes

A South Side shoe store, heavy on the hot pink, is part of a program to make sure it survives and stays out of the red

By Susan Chandler | Tribune staff reporter
November 12, 2007

The Sensual Steps shoe salon is a fuchsia slash across a desolate block in Bronzeville.

Its hot-pink awning beckons to drivers as they cruise along the 4500 block of South Cottage Grove Avenue. But the South Side neighborhood gives them just as much reason to keep going.

In a weedy expanse across the street, children jump on a discarded mattress. To the right and left are vacant lots. Next door, a black fence sports a scribbled sign that proclaims: "Big K Plumbing Supply." The area is gentrifying -- new condos line the street just a few blocks to the north -- but there are plenty of poor, unemployed people who live in the area.

Video

Sensual Steps' colorful oasis offers a world apart from its surroundings. Visitors must wait to be buzzed in.

Once inside, customers are offered sweet rolls and coffee and are invited to relax in oversize armchairs.







Nicole Jones, the 36-year-old former banker who opened the store in 2005, wanted to bring a Lincoln Park-style boutique to the women of her neighborhood. "A lot of people told me, 'Oh, Nicole, you're crazy. I can't believe you're about to build this business on this block where there's no other businesses,'" Jones said. "I knew also that, in time, these businesses were going to come, and also I would have made a smart move by being able to afford to get in early."

She may have been too early.

Sales got off to a strong start the first year, then fell off in 2006. Jones figured the store was being hurt by a lack of foot traffic and construction on Cottage Grove. She had an epiphany: She would supplement store sales by taking shoes to her customers using Tupperware-style parties in people's homes. She bought a Hummer, had it wrapped in pink and launched her "Heels on Wheels" program. The novelty attracted lots of media attention; Internet sales took off and revenue soared during the final three months of the year.

This year has been a different story. Sales plunged during the summer to about \$12,000 to \$15,000 a month, half of what they were in good months. Jones isn't really sure what

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has changed, but she knows the situation is becoming dire.

Jones reached out for help, applying to the Chicago Urban League's new NextOne program for black-owned businesses. NextOne is an experiment to see if providing six months of intensive assistance to minority entrepreneurs can help them become more successful, grow faster, hire more employees.

In late September, Jones found out Sensual Steps was one of 16 businesses selected from more than 140 applicants. Most were bigger than her company -- a construction company, several contractors, a law firm, an accounting firm. Everyone was hoping to get a boost from the program, but Jones was hoping for something more: a dramatic improvement in revenue and profit that would allow her to stop subsidizing her business and take a salary for the first time in two and a half years.

As part of NextOne, Jones is receiving a team of accountants, sales and marketing consultants and a business-life coach. She also is required to attend daylong classes on occasional Saturdays during the six months.

It's 9:15 on a late October morning when Jones sits down at the laptop



[Shoes](#) [Photos](#)

Shoes and NextOne are steps to success for Nicole Jones [Video](#)

on her polished wood dining room table in her rehabbed Bronzeville home to fill out a business "self-assessment."

With a Starbucks decaf mocha by her side, she must respond to more than 50 statements on a scale of "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." There are lots of things she is proud of, like how she treats her employees, but Jones isn't kidding herself: She has plenty to work on.

Does her mission statement clearly explain her reason for being in business?" "I somewhat agree," she says. "It could be better." Does her business have a clear competitive edge? "We have some uniqueness but we could do more."

How has her company identified customer needs? She has tried. "People said, 'We want lower heels.' I got that. They said, 'We want gym shoes.' I got that."

Then comes a patch of tough ones.

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Does she understand why customers are not purchasing her goods? Not really. Is her customer base growing at a rate that meets or exceeds industry standards? "We aren't meeting either."

Does she have enough financial resources to grow? "I strongly disagree."

One statement Jones must respond to is "Cynicism is absent at our company." For someone who owns a store painted in hot pink, that's a gimme. "I strongly agree."

"That was painless," Jones says 15 minutes later when she is done.

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