

TodoSuma: Addressing Women's Empowerment Through Crochet

Bolivia

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www.todosuma.life

TodoSuma's overarching goals outlined for this project were to undergo company expansion in order to meet an increase in demand, provide more employment opportunities, and empower more women in Cochabamba, Bolivia. To achieve these main goals, our subgoals included 1) registering as a business and establishing an online presence; 2) providing technical training and capacity-building workshops for women employed by TodoSuma; and 3) developing new product lines targeting a broader range of consumers.

We did not participate in any other fund-raising efforts for this project. In order to begin the project, we needed to recruit women to work for TodoSuma. Originally, we had planned to do so by partnering with community-based organizations (CBOs) who worked with victims of domestic violence and unemployed women. However, we found that the women we connected with through these CBOs (e.g., Mosoj Yan), were either too young, not interested in working for TodoSuma, or were in need of more comprehensive support (psychological, physical, etc.) before they could expect to hold down a job. We were ultimately referred to Nadeth Tapia, who has been training and supervising the production of crochet items by women in Cochabamba for 15 years. After interviewing Nadeth, we determined that her network and years of experience would be instrumental in the implementation of our project, as well as efficiency and sustainability in future TodoSuma operations. Nadeth was brought on as TodoSuma's new Production Director; her responsibilities include providing crochet technical training to the 15 women she had recruited, delegating production tasks, and overseeing the production of orders.

We began the company's expansion with a transition from all custom-made-to-order products to select products, styles, colors, and standardized sizing. To this end, we selected five bikini styles, five crop top styles, and developed crochet beach cover-ups, home decor, and even men's tie designs. We established the company website, registered it as a business in Bolivia, and developed a brand ambassador program. We also began negotiations with boutiques in the US and Mexico who were interested in carrying our products.

There were a number of adjustments we needed to make in the actual implementation of the project. Originally, we had planned on providing technical training in the form of workshops, which would address the group of women as a whole. However, after consulting with the women themselves, we discovered that because of their schedules and responsibilities at home, it would be virtually impossible for them to all convene with the frequency necessary to learn the crochet skills. We met with Nadeth to place our largest order yet (65 units in total), and she began the process of filling the order by training each woman to become an expert in the production of one specific TodoSuma product.

Different understandings of timeliness were an important cultural challenge we experienced. While the US is a time-oriented culture, Bolivia is a relationship-oriented culture; deadlines are considered much more flexible in Bolivia compared to the US. For example, this became a problem for us when we placed orders for products we needed to ship by a certain date. Nadeth assured us the women would be able to have the products ready in time, but on the day of the deadline, she informed us that they needed more time to finish. As a result, we adapted our approach to accommodate both cultural norms; we would only sell products directly from our inventory, as opposed to selling those that had not yet been produced.

Organizing the logistics of the capacity building workshops included navigating a few unforeseen obstacles. We needed to find a time and location that was convenient for the women and for Dr. Saba, the workshop facilitator. We had originally planned to convene for the capacity building workshops every week for six weeks, but the month of July was difficult for the women because they needed to be at home harvesting crops on various days during the week, and therefore would not be able to commit to weekly workshops in the city center. Consequently, we met with Dr. Saba and agreed to spread the workshops out over a longer period of time - one workshop per month.

In order to plan an effective capacity building workshop, we asked Nadeth to provide relevant information about our 15 new recruits. Ten of the women were responsible for childcare, and needed to work from home, while five came to work in Nadeth's workshop in the city center. Importantly, none of the women have an education beyond primary school. With all this in mind, we worked with Dr. Saba to design the first workshop to include participation from all of us. We developed the first workshop to address themes of personal empowerment, self worth, and purpose. This first workshop was even more successful than we had hoped; the participating women knew Dr. Saba by reputation and expressed deep admiration for her previous work, and were enthusiastically engaged throughout the entire workshop.

This project has direct and immediate impact for at least 16 Bolivian women and their families, but is catalyzing much more positive change for the future. In under one year, TodoSuma has progressed from paying one woman for one bikini to employing 16 women full-time. Successfully taking the first key steps in business expansion through this project reflects TodoSuma's capacity for scalability and sustainability, and consequently demonstrates its potential to benefit many more women and families.

As a social enterprise, TodoSuma is part of a growing international movement demonstrating that the adoption of a people-over-profit business model in a capitalism-dominated global market is not only possible, but necessary. Ethical sourcing and social responsibility have become selling points for today's consumer goods; we believe they are the future of successful for-profit business.

Section II

We define peace as a state in which every citizen of the world has an equal opportunity to pursue purpose and success, where the greatest good is achieved because all human capital is being effectively and ethically mobilized. The concept of peace implies harmony and coexistence among all people; we believe that each individual's autonomy and independence is a prerequisite for achieving this harmony and coexistence.

With this in mind, we believe that empowering women, the world's largest untapped source of human capital, is one of the most effective strategies for achieving the long-term goal of peace. Moreover, the economic empowerment of women serves two fundamental purposes; 1) making progress toward creating a new status quo of equality for all; and 2) catalyzing the universally beneficial progress and innovation guaranteed by the full integration of women in the world's workforce.

TodoSuma is a social business that both fuels and is fueled by the empowerment of women. We have developed a for-profit business model that, rather than condemn capitalism and consumerist society, demonstrates their compatibility with social responsibility. Women who work for TodoSuma are able to work from home, enabling them to support their children in more ways than one. Through this project, we have not only succeeded in creating more fair-paying jobs for women, but influenced even more Americans to consider the power of their choices as consumers, and to start conversations about making more conscious decisions in order to consume more ethically and responsibly. Each new consumer we can inspire to hold producers to a higher ethical standard is a small, but significant, step in the direction of peace.

Our company's name, "Todo Suma," is taken from a Spanish proverb: "En la vida, como el universo, todo suma. Nada resta". This translates to, "In life, as in the universe, everything adds up. Nothing remains." **In other words, every action by every person, even those with the smallest impacts, is a contribution. We must be cognizant of the power we hold as individuals, for these contributions either aid the world's progress towards peace, or its regression away from it (Fabiana and Yasmine Karam).** This project has changed our habits as consumers, because we have seen the impact of supporting ethical, socially responsible business practice firsthand. We want to maximize our own contributions to bettering the world, but also make it easier for others to do their part. **This project has not only affirmed our belief that achieving true equality and peace is possible; it has empowered us as women, first world consumers, and global citizens to take an active role in getting us there (Yasmine Karam).**



06/30/17: Fabiana and Yasmine visiting Patricia's house located in Quillacollo, Cochabamba, Bolivia.