



Saloni Kantaria, the Kenyan entrepreneur mixing fitness with technology

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The fitness bug has hit Kenya and a former competitive tennis player turned lawyer and now entrepreneur is taking advantage of it by bringing something new to the exercise scene with the help of technology. Meet Saloni Kantaria, the founder of Reform Cycling and Strength Studio in Nairobi.

There are a number of high tech fitness programs out there, what is Reform Studio bringing to the table?

Although integrating technology into cardio focused fitness classes has become more popular in boutique fitness studios in New York, Sydney, Singapore, Dubai and London, in East Africa no such concept existed. I felt that the Nairobi market was sophisticated enough and ready for (a) a boutique class focused fitness studio; and (b) a studio where technology integrated with fitness in the classes. Accordingly, we came up with what's known as the Reform Board, which are screens in our cycling and strength studio which enable clients to see their own and everyone else's performance data in live stream during the class. This promotes friendly competition during the classes and generally pushes clients more than they normally would as their competitive instinct comes out when they see how they are performing against everyone else in class. In our strength studio clients can see which heart rate zones they are working out in. Our instructors guide where your numbers should be at a point in time during the class. Once class is done, the performance data is then emailed to the client and stored in their on line account. In summary, Reform enables clients to track their performance data class to class so they can determine with objective numbers if in fact they are getting fitter.

How did people react to your unique business model and the various fitness programs your studio offers?

We opened our doors in January 2016. For expats residing in Nairobi from cities which contain similar boutique fitness studios as Reform Cycling and Strength Studio, they were immediately familiar with our concept and joined our classes. For Kenyans who had not been exposed to similar studios overseas, they took some time to get familiar with the concept but immediately liked what they saw. Nine months since we opened, we have a blend of both expats and Kenyans who are regulars at Reform. Our clients seem to be enjoying the fact that they can take a variety of classes between the cycling studio and strength studio and therefore get a total body workout.

What inspired you to start Reform Cycling and Strength Studio?

After I finished playing college tennis in the US, I was not as keen to play tennis everyday but wanted to remain fit. I was bored of the gym and wanted to do and try different things. I therefore started going to a lot of classes at the gyms and enjoyed the variety these classes offered. In 2009 in Sydney where I lived, I noticed boutique pilates studios starting to pop up everywhere. When I moved to Dubai in 2011, I noticed similar concepts existed in Dubai too. Unlike gyms which offered classes, the studio classes were of significantly higher quality and the instructors were technically very good. The reason people were attending these studios (including me) was because the classes were focused, efficient use of one's time and of high quality. In Nairobi, although plenty of gyms existed, there was no high quality fitness studio offering a variety of classes for healthy young adults, elderly adults and elite athletes. Having noticed that there was more confidence in the Nairobi market and more investment coming back into the country and SMEs open up, I felt Nairobi was ready for a boutique fitness studio concept which integrated technology into its classes and with the aim of attracting men and women of all fitness levels, aspiring athletes and elderly adults who could attend classes to improve their joint mobility and strength.

From your experience, how important is it for more businesses to embrace the use of technology?

In this day and age, it's absolutely necessary to embrace technology. Everyone is interested in data and this is why the fitbit / jawbone has become a popular gadget that people want to wear to track how many steps they have taken a day. Phone companies recognize this and apple has put a health tracker app on all phones. Other than our use of the Reform Board, clients can also book their classes online through our website. We manage all client accounts online and this has enabled us to run Reform smoothly.

Tell us a bit about your background and the role it played in your sporting career?

My dad introduced me to tennis at the age of 6. I loved the sport and would spend hours after school and on weekends with my dad and little brother on the tennis court. I played in many junior and senior tennis tournaments in Kenya and travelled and represented Kenya. I became the top women's player in the country and had a junior world ranking. My goal was to play for a division 1 school in the US and pursue my undergraduate degree. I achieved this and then went onto law school as I wanted to become a lawyer. I still continue to play club level tennis and played in Sydney and now in Dubai.

Why did you stop playing tennis professionally?

My goal was to play division 1 college tennis in the United States for a strong academic university and I achieved that by playing for Cornell University. I never wanted to play tennis full time / professionally as I always enjoyed academics and knew I could never make a career from only playing tennis. I had always maintained strong grades and aspired to be a professional (i.e. A lawyer or doctor).

How did you make the switch from an athlete to a lawyer and then to a fitness entrepreneur?

To clarify, I am not a fitness instructor! I played college tennis while I was studying at Cornell University and then went onto law school at the University of Sydney and became a lawyer in 2006. I pursued my masters of law from the University of

Chicago in 2008 to 2009. From 2009 to 2015, I practised law with an international law firm in Sydney and Dubai. I have taken a break from practising law as I wanted to open up Reform Cycling and Strength Studio. My goal is to continue practising law but I will do that only once I'm satisfied that Reform is running on its own and needs less management input.

What challenges did you face getting the fitness studio off the ground?

The biggest challenge getting Reform off the ground was procuring all of the fitness equipment and construction materials. Although I tried my best to source these locally, the prices I was quoted were exorbitant and it was much more cost effective sourcing everything from the US. I therefore had the task of ordering the fitness equipment and construction material from various parts of the US, consolidating it in a city in the US, then having it shipped to Mombasa. From Mombasa we had to send it over to Nairobi and finally to Reform's location in Western Heights.

A second challenge was managing the construction of the studio. I had a very good contractor who was very easy to work with fortunately but we had the challenge of trying to finish this project in the time frame I wanted to when Western Heights itself was not completed. We therefore had to work closely with the developers of the building to ensure that the building was completed in time to enable Reform to open its doors in January 2016. A third challenge was finding the right instructors and training them. I am technically very fussy and therefore was looking for instructors who were open minded, willing to learn, had a good presence, and understood my vision for Reform. I interviewed many instructors and recruited 4 full time instructors. I then had a team of master instructors from Paris and London come to train our instructors.

What are your plans for the immediate future as a fitness entrepreneur with a love for high tech equipment?

The plan is to expand Reform Cycling and Strength Studio within and outside of East Africa. We first need to ensure our first branch consistently attains the standard we want it to.

What is the biggest piece of advice you can give to other women?

Don't be scared to take risks. Perhaps your venture will fail, perhaps it will be successful but until you give it a go you're never going to know. That said, take your time to do your due diligence - understand how much money you need for your project, find ways to cut down the cost, ensure you recruit the right staff, set a timeline for your venture and aim to meet it otherwise you will procrastinate due to fear.

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