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Why I ventured into hotel business – Austin Iruotor

Austin Iruotor is the owner of the prestigious White House Hotel and Conference Centre, Ikeja, Lagos State. In this chat with BAYO ADEOYE (of News Star), the amiable Delta State-born hotelier talks about the challenges of the business, his vision for tourism industry in Nigeria and many other things.

Q. Despite the global economic recession, White House Hotel and Conference Centre is still soaring higher. So, could you tell me the secret behind your success story?

We didn't just build the second phase of the hotel; it is a long time plan. The G.R.A., Ikeja branch of the hotel was even supposed to come before this. It was a project that had been in the pipeline for a long time. But this is the time God said it would happen and we thank Him for that. Though the economy is very tough globally, we give glory unto God for seeing us through.

Q. Would you mind sharing the secret of the business with me?

There is really no secret, so to say. It is something that had been there for some time, but we couldn't achieve it due to some constraints. So there's really no secret about it. We just need to give glory to God.

Q. Recently, the Lagos State government imposed some taxes on operators of hotels in the state. How would you react to this?

I think the case is in court. We won the first round of the case, but I learnt that the state government is appealing it. But I don't know how far they have gone about that. With these taxes, I believe the cost is going to bounce back on our customers. It is going to make the business tougher. In developed countries like the United States, the government is assisting their businessmen by injecting funds into their businesses; but in Nigeria, it is the other way round.

Today, no bank is ready to give you facilities for business. People are losing their jobs; the economy is in a shaky situation. We are in a very tough period and the government is imposing more hardship on us; this is very bad. The Power Holding Corporation of Nigeria (PHCN) is not performing; I run the generator in this place non-stop. But you have to remain tough as well.

Your customers will not entertain any story from you; all they want is delivery. Those are the challenges we are facing in this business. We hope the government will be more lenient with us. We pay a lot of other taxes already. The meltdown is affecting our businesses; the patronage is very low at the moment.

Q. The White House Hotel and Conference Centre has gone through a lot of phases, you started with a restaurant and bar, events centre, clubs and now hotel. Why has the journey been so?

A child has to learn to crawl before learning how to walk. The vision has been there, but you have to start somewhere. You can not start from the top, but from the bottom. It was also as a result of the yearnings of our numerous clientele. Whenever they came for events, they asked us

for accommodation and we thought of the way to satisfy them more; so, that brought about the hotel business. Without them, we won't be in this business.

Q. So, will I be right to say you never really wanted to be in the hotel business?

No, it is not so. It had been in the pipeline long before then, but we had to do serious (feasibility) studies before coming into it. It has been our long (term) dream; so, when our customers started demanding for accommodation, we felt it was the right time for us to finally go into it.

In everything you do, you have to wait for God to open the way for you; you wait for His appointed time. Once it stays, it has to stay forever. If God gives something to you, that thing is going to stay forever. For instance, if God gives you a good wife, there is nothing that will ever separate you, except death. It is God's time really.

Q. To some people, tourism, particularly hotel business is a way of promoting promiscuity. Do you support this or not?

It's not. Most people who use hotels are those in the corporate world. You have lots of movements into this country; the airport is just a five minute drive from here. We don't even have enough good hotels in Nigeria, especially in Lagos where lots of people are moving in. We hoteliers know that lots of people come into this country from abroad and they stay in hotels.

Tourism is promoting our image. When foreigners come to Nigeria, their first major point of interactions with anybody is a hotel. I remember we once had some South Africans here; but before they arrived, they had some bad notions about Nigerians. They were, however, impressed with the way we approached and accommodated them. It is a business that promoted our country. We can rebrand Nigeria through this and not about wasting money on television campaigns and bill board adverts.

Q. What's the vision for the tourism industry in Nigeria?

We still have a long way to go. But there is lot of room for improvement. Most of these things are individual efforts. If the government can support us more, we shall get there.

Q. I remember when you started this business, you promoted lots of artistes who performed here, but it seems your focus in now to promote the hotel?

No, we are still doing it. We are not drifting away from promoting artistes. But we are not particularly 100% into it.

Q. What were you doing before you ventured into the hotel business?

I was into properties, building construction, management, selling and buying.

Q. Then, why did you come into the hotel business?

I am a man who likes to be busy; I like to work everyday.

Q. How do you relax?

I am a homely man. I like to be at home with my family. Apart from coming to office, I don't really like going out. I swim and watch football – I am a fan of Manchester United.