



When the Rider Outshines the Sender

A Ugandan Wake-Up Call on Customer Service and
SME Management

Background story

The insistent buzz of my phone cut through the afternoon traffic near Mulago gate. I glanced at the screen — *Print 4 Me*. My stomach sank. After weeks of missed deadlines, evasive updates, and error-laden deliveries, I was bracing for yet another excuse from the supplier.

The owner, Naya, had a peculiar gift: the more he failed, the more entitled he sounded. He'd insisted I pay the full amount before delivery. I complied. He delayed. He blamed me.

"Freddie, I've got too many big orders! You're putting me under pressure."

My simple question was — why accept the order in the first place if you couldn't meet the deadline? Why collect payment upfront with full confidence, only to deliver incomplete and flawed work?

So when I received a call that afternoon, my expectations were at zero. But it wasn't Naya. It was a lady.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Freddie. This is Maria from Print 4 Me. I'm calling to confirm your corrected items are ready. We apologise sincerely for the delays and previous errors."

Her tone was calm, graceful — completely disarming. I paused. This was a shift. It felt like someone had finally taken the customer seriously. Not just the transaction. Not just the money.

And then came surprise number two. The boda boda rider, Robert, called from near Mulago gate.

"Sir, I have your package. May I confirm your location?"

He was soft-spoken, respectful, and remarkably composed. When he arrived, he carried himself like someone who owned the brand — neat, careful, and apologetic for a minor scuff mark on the package.

That rider was more professional than the business owner.

That day, I tipped him generously — not for the delivery, but for the dignity with which he did it. He represented the service I had longed for. He showed ubuntu — shared humanity in the service of another.

What *Print 4 Me* Got Wrong

This experience, while salvaged by Maria and Robert, exposed major managerial gaps. Their excellence was a happy accident, not a business strategy.

That's dangerous.

Without structured systems, Print 4 Me stumbled into good service by luck. You can't scale luck. You can't build a legacy on accidents.

Let's unpack what should have been done, using the **International Trade Centre's Business Management System (BMS)** as a framework.

Key Lessons for SMEs:

- **Institutionalize Customer Care:** Train all staff in basic communication, empathy, and follow-through. Maria shouldn't be the exception. She should be the template.
- **Separate Operations from Management:** Naya was doing too much—badly. Delegation is not a luxury. It's the only way to survive. Assign roles. Supervise results.
- **Adopt Workflow Tools:** Free tools like Trello or Google Sheets could have helped track progress and deadlines. "I forgot" is no longer a valid excuse.
- **Change the Payment Model:** Demanding full payment before delivery removes all pressure to perform. Use milestones. Tie payment to output.
- **Match Confidence with Competence:** Naya's bravado masked incompetence. Confidence is not a business model. Execution is.



The Bigger Picture: Uganda's SME Culture

Uganda's small businesses make up over 90% of the private sector, but many are plagued by informality, disorganization, and dependence on the owner.

If Naya took a week off, Print 4 Me would collapse. That's not entrepreneurship. That's a bottleneck.

Here's how the BMS pillars apply:

BMS Pillar	Principle	Ugandan SME Reality
Leadership & Direction	Set clear vision and delegate responsibility	Most SMEs run on personality, not process
Customer Focus	Respond to customer feedback, complaints, and timelines	Complaints seen as nuisance, not opportunity
Operations Control	Track deadlines and deliverables systematically	Owners operate reactively, firefighting without data
People Management	Empower staff, define roles, reward performance	Delivery staff outperform management — a serious red flag
Performance Monitoring	Monitor KPIs and feedback loops	"Business is slow" isn't data. It's just a complaint

Final Thoughts

Maria didn't just make a phone call. Robert didn't just make a delivery. Together, they restored a customer's faith — in a business that had nearly lost it. The tragedy is that Naya didn't see the magic he was sitting on. He had good people but no systems. He had volume but no structure. He had talent at the bottom, but mismanagement at the top.

The challenge to Uganda's SMEs is simple: **Stop glorifying hustle and start honoring systems.** Build businesses that serve—not just survive.

Let's stop asking customers to lower expectations. Let's raise our standards instead

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