



Innovate Now
Unlocking Human Potential

CASE STUDY

SIGNS MEDIA KENYA LIMITED



**SOCIAL AND CIVIC PARTICIPATION FOR
DEAF AND HARD OF HEARING PERSONS
THROUGH BROADCASTING MEDIA AND
MOBILE BASED ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY**

Prepared by

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Signs Media Kenya Limited is a social enterprise that propagates the social, economic and political and talent development of PWDs through Assistive Technology.

LUKE MULEKA

*Managing Director, **Signs Media Kenya Limited***



INTRODUCTION

PROBLEM

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), over 5% of the world's population suffers from disabling hearing loss totaling to about 360 million people across the globe with Kenya contributing to about 600,000 people to that number.

Most of these people live in low- and middle-income countries, where the access to healthcare and quality of health organizations is lower than that of developed countries.



Signs Media Kenya Limited's Journey

HOW IT STARTED

The Founder and Managing Director of Signs Media, Luke Muleka was highly motivated to venture into disability innovation because when growing up his deaf sister was always left out as the rest of the family enjoyed watching television programmes such as movies, music, and other local entertainment.

He promised himself that one day he would help her by persuading television stations to air sign language programmes, even if only for a few minutes so that people who are deaf like her could enjoy entertainment.

Mr. Muleka took time to look for partnerships with like-minded television stations requesting them to air sign language programmes to benefit the deaf community. At this time, few had sign interpreters during news time. Television stations he approached were not comfortable airing programmes that had no voice, as it would not augur well with marketers/advertisers and majority of their audience (hearing population). The refusal was a blessing in disguise because it pushed him into thinking of starting own station.

Luke embarked on the journey to look for frequency for sign language television stations. Along the way he met people who discouraged him and few partners, but this was not sustainable since there weren't immediate returns.

Luke convinced himself to continue pursuing the dream. Since he was still employed as a banker, he decided to take a loan plus own savings, constructed a studio, and purchased equipment.

PHASE 1 SIGNS TV

In 2015 the company applied to the Communication Authority of Kenya to run a television station broadcasting in Sign Language and was granted. In February 2017, Signs Media started broadcasting free to air platforms - Signs TV and is also found on channels like GoTV and Startimes. The platform broadcasts in Kenyan sign language with voice as an override airing films/movies, music-both gospel, and secular and Bible interpretation. Its main objectives being to educate, inform and entertain in sign language by extension enhancing disability and the deaf culture, where 80% of the programmes are hosted by persons with disabilities.

Their target audience includes but was not limited to the deaf, persons with albinism, persons with visual impairment and persons with mobility challenges. At the beginning, the company broadcasted in 14 counties reaching 300 persons with disabilities and so far in 37 countries with a general audience of 1.5 million with 550,000 persons with disabilities.

Signs TV revenue stream includes advertisements, documentaries, and general partnerships to organizations at very affordable rates.

PHASE 2 assistALL App

In 2020 when COVID-19 pandemic hit the world, deaf persons faced challenges with communication, bearing in mind part of the deaf community read lips and masks were a mandatory protective measure. In a bid to solve this problem the team developed the assistALL mobile application to provide on demand virtual sign language interpretation on the virtual space.



The company conducted several user/product testing and market validation and received valuable feedback, which was incorporated into improving the app.

In April 2022, the app was officially launched into the market. It operates on an affordable per-minute billing charging Kshs. 30.

The app is currently available on Google play store. Key product features include easy sign up by interpreters and users, mobile money payment platforms such as Mpesa and other major global payment platforms i.e. Visa and PayPal. Integrated mobile money in use is currently in Kenya only but working towards expanding its territories into the African market preferably in Nigeria by the end of the year 2023.

KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

- Emerged first runners up in the Communications Authority of Kenya 2018 and 2019 KUZA awards, for the programming that is geared towards addressing Persons with Disabilities.
- Was awarded the winner of the 2018 SDG Ambassadors Award- a challenge organized by (UNDP, British Council and ActionAid).
- Won in the DIAR Awards 2019 -Disability Inclusion-Corporate Champion category.
- Signs TV is ranked among top 50 solutions by the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network and was featured in the Youth Solutions Report 2019 which was unveiled at the 74th United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) High-Level Side Event on Social Business, Youth and Technology.
- Won at the Youth Connect Africa 2019 held in Kigali, Rwanda.
- Awarded at the Zero Conference 2020 – Tools to support communication in Vienna, Austria.
- In 2020, UNDP-K Disability Innovations Fund awarded in 2020
- In 2021, was awarded a grant by the GSMA innovation fund for assistive technologies.
- In July 2022, the company got into partnership with Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and was mandated to oversee voter education and information for persons with hearing impairment.



BUSINESS MODEL AND STRATEGIES

Business Incorporation and Model

Signs Media Kenya was incorporated as a Limited Liability Company operating a Special Enterprise Model which means the company can receive grants from partners and still be able to make profit from their sales. Signs Media has three brands namely Signs TV, assistALL app and the Uhai Festival (an outreach program that enables the company to reach out to their users and receive feedback). The company prides itself in its core values namely, Disability Inclusion across all their brands and employees as well as Zero Discrimination – in its operations and workplace.

User Testing

As a participant in Innovate Now accelerator program (Africa's First Assistive Technology Accelerator) Cohort 3, the company went through active curriculum and live labs which helped validate the assistALL app with the users and got feedback that helped to improve the platform. Live Labs is a space provided for clinical partners to help our start-ups understand, validate and test AT products and services for persons with disabilities.

How The Product Works

The assistALL app can be easily accessed on an android phone by downloading it from the Google play store from all over the world. A deaf person then creates a profile and proceeds to register from the menu, edit the profile and add their phone number. To effectively get interpretation services from the assistALL app, the user must load money into their wallet using M-Pesa mobile money push notification or via visa debit card.

An interpreter on the app must log in, allow the app to access the phone dialer and camera and finally create a profile by adding a photo and phone number. To ensure quality of interpreters, the company through its quality control department vets the interpreters to ensure competence and high-quality service. Interpreters then receive a call to offer interpretation services after which they are paid into their M-Pesa registered number immediately after the call. This app allows interpreters to offer interpretation services at the comfort of their homes and saves them time and travel expenses.

Team Composition

The company has a board of directors who help them to strategically steer the company to the next level. Currently the company has 43 staff members out of which 60% are persons with disabilities.

In addition to 5 in house sign language interpreters, the company has to date onboarded 150 sign language interpreters on the assistALL platform.

Customer Acquisition, Usage & Validation

The assistALL app has had 8,000 downloads with a total of 4,500 calls activated on the app, translating to a total of 20,000 minutes of call to date.

The company's business model has evolved and is currently also focusing on corporates within the banking, healthcare, airlines, and logistic companies.

Go to Market Strategy

Assistive Technology space is still new in Kenya and the Africa region as a whole. Sign Media focuses its efforts to educate the public on disability inclusion and the need for assistive technology first before introducing its offering. They do this through speaking engagements and using their position as the current first vice chair of the Kenya Business Disability Network in various forums. They also present directly to human resources divisions of various organizations. The company's growth has also been steered through strategic partnerships with various institutions to help further advocate for persons with disabilities.

Fundraising

Signs media received a grant of \$8,000 from UNDP Kenya and raised a further GBP 143,000 from GSMA Innovations Fund towards further development of the app, take to market and customer acquisition.

KEY TRAITS CONTRIBUTING TO SIGNS MEDIA'S SUCCESS

- ***In depth understanding of the problem and passion to solve the problem***

Passion and drive to solve a problem for a family member drove the founder to deeply understand the problem. Though faced by obstacles, Luke did not give up until he found a solution, founded signs media, AssistALL App and is still in the innovation journey for other products that can support the deaf community.

- ***Product and market validation***

User validation contributed to accelerated product development and launch of assistAll App. Users during Innovate Now Live Labs resonated with the App and feedback helped improve the quality of the product and service delivery.

- ***Building a global product***

AssistALL App can be accessed anywhere in the world. Sign language interpreters can join from across the globe and provide the much-needed service.

- ***Unique Business Model***

A well outlined business model has helped with key customer acquisition. Incorporating as a Limited Liability Company and operating a Special Enterprise Model has enabled the company to receive grants from partners and still be able to make profit from their sales.

- ***Participating in various SME programmes***

Visibility from the innovate Now programme enabled the company to be shortlisted in other SME enabler programmes facilitating product completion and launch to market.

- ***Strong market proposition***

The founder is passionate about disability inclusion and innovation. He speaks in a lot of forums to democratize AT and in the process shares his personal/company journey in disability inclusion and innovation. Storytelling has helped the company to build their brands and further enhance disability inclusion and innovation.

SUCCESS STORY

In July 2022, voters with hearing disabilities made an appeal to the Kenya Electoral Body (IEBC) stakeholders meeting to provide sign language interpretation services to assist them on Election Day. AssistALL apps were contracted to offer this support. 7,000 downloads with a total of 4,000 calls was activated on the app during the election period, translating to a total of 20,000 minutes on the App.

FOUNDER'S TRAITS CONTRIBUTING TO ASSISTALL SUCCESS

- **Passion and Commitment**

Luke stated that passion is a key driver to success. From an early age, he was passionate about finding a solution to ensure his sister is included. Losing his sister did not stop his vision. He pushed on until he developed a product that was fit for the market.

- **Resilience**

The Covid 19 pandemic did not deter the founder from innovating a solution that would work for a community of persons with disabilities.

- **Innovation**

Luke's drive to constantly improve on existing products/processes enabled him to develop a new idea.



For more information, contact us on:
inadmin@kilimanjaro-blindtrust.org

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