Access Bank: Strategic Women’s Market Segmentation Yields Strong Growth at Nigerian Bank

Access Bank at a Glance

- **Founded in 1988,** Access Bank Nigeria is one of the country’s largest banks in terms of asset base, loans, deposits and branch network.
- The bank is part of Access Bank Group, with operations in 8 countries in Africa – Nigeria, Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ghana, Rwanda, Gambia, Sierra Leone, Zambia – as well as the United Kingdom.
- As of 2017 the bank had over 10 million customers in Nigeria, about one-third of whom were women. More than 31 percent of the bank’s loan portfolio is held by women clients.
- Forty-six percent of the bank’s total workforce was female as of 2017, with 36 percent representation at the board level.
- Access Bank has had a strategic focus on the Women’s Market since 2006, when it became the first bank in West Africa to join the GBA. Its W Initiative serves women across retail and business banking.
- The bank has received dozens of awards over the past several years related to sustainability and women’s economic empowerment, including being named one of Nigeria’s Top 100 Most Respected Companies by Businessday in 2019, the Best Bank Transformation award by Euromoney in 2016, and Most Sustainable Bank by World Finance and Sustainable Bank of the Year by CBN in 2017.

One of the Big Four banks in Nigeria, Access Bank Plc has a long history of prioritizing sustainability in its business practices. Recognizing the potential role women could play in the bank’s long-term success, Access Bank began looking for ways to address their financial needs in 2006. Soon after, the bank joined the Global Banking Alliance for Women (GBA), and IFC identified it as a strong partner for one of its first Gender Entrepreneurship Markets (GEM) loans in Africa. In 2014 Access Bank expanded the program, branding it W Initiative and building out offerings based around the needs of additional segments within the Women’s Market: young professionals, women with families and women in business. In just 3 years the W Initiative led to Women’s Market current and savings account growth of 46 percent, with 58 percent growth in lending to women's enterprises and 308 percent growth in personal loans to women. Today the bank is viewed as a leader in serving women in Nigeria, with more than 3.5 million female customers across the country. Based on the success of the program, Access Bank has rolled the W Initiative out to its subsidiaries in Ghana, Rwanda and Zambia.

Choosing the Women’s Market

Access Bank first became interested in strategically targeting the Women’s Market after the research they conducted when seeking potential new markets revealed a high rate of business ownership among women in Nigeria. As the bank began looking at how it could effectively meet the needs of this market, it approached IFC, which was looking to expand its outreach to women business owners under the GEM program. Under the agreement, IFC provided US$15 million in credit as well as US$400,000 in advisory services intended to help grow the know-how and capacity of women entrepreneurs in the country. The results were compelling: More than US$35 million in loans were disbursed over a 3-year period, with less than 1 percent non-performing.

Nevertheless, gender gaps persisted: In 2011, 49 percent of women in Nigeria were employed and 27 percent had an account at a financial institution, yet only 5 percent were borrowing from banks or using credit cards. Seeking to tap this opportunity, Access Bank decided to expand its program. The bank understood that women are not a homogeneous market and that their needs can differ widely based on a variety of factors, so it commissioned international research firm AC Nielsen to identify which Women’s Market segments would hold the most potential for the bank and how they might most effectively meet their needs. The three target markets were identified, and the bank launched the W Initiative in 2014.

References:
1. ILO, ILOSTAT database and World Bank population estimates
2. World Bank Global Findex database
3. Ibid.
AC Nielsen conducted market research across distinct groups of women in Nigeria. Through 32 focus groups comprising women of various socioeconomic levels, the bank surveyed mass market women, young professional women aged 20-29, owners of start-ups, informal business owners, small and medium enterprise owners, affluent women with assets of up to N50 million (US$140,000) and high net worth women with assets of up to N500 million (US$1.4 million).

The research revealed that three segments, based on life cycle state, should be prioritized: young women with jobs, who are highly interested in saving for their own security, and developing their professional and financial skills; women with families, who prioritize wealth creation for their children, insurance products and education; and women business owners, who tend to lack collateral for loans and are unable to access lower-cost funding, have a need for business education services and advice, and want help facilitating their transactions for their businesses.

Armed with this information, the bank utilized a mix of existing products and ones modified to better meet women’s needs, creating tailored CVPs for each of the three segments. The CVPs incorporate a mix of financial products and non-financial services, with offerings from multiple strategic business units within the bank.

“When we bank women, we are banking people who influence everybody else around them.”

- Victor Etuokwu
Executive Director, Access Bank Plc.

### Building the CVP: Three Segments

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Segment</th>
<th>W Young Professionals</th>
<th>W and Family</th>
<th>W in Business</th>
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<tr>
<td>Target Market</td>
<td>Career-focused women who are at a pre-family stage of their lives and who are not engaged in their own or part-owned businesses</td>
<td>Mix of professionally qualified middle and upper middle market women, married with children, consisting of non-working housewives, women who are engaged in professional employment and women who may be engaged in running their own informal micro/home-based business</td>
<td>Women managing their own micro, small or medium-sized enterprises who are responsible for making most business and financial decisions</td>
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| Financial Solutions | • Everyday Banking Account  
• Target Savings Account  
• Premier Savings Account  
• Automatic Pay Day Advance  
• Rent advance  
• Vehicle, educational, travel, personal loans at discounted rates  
• Maternal Health Service Support  
• Credit card | • Current account (single/joint)  
• Target savings account  
• Early savers for children  
• Solo Account for Youths  
• Evergreen account for parents  
• Instant savings for dependents and domestics  
• Diaspora accounts for family abroad  
• Automatic pay day advance  
• Maternal Health Service Support  
• Family Banking suite of products  
• Utility cards  
• Personal, family, home, travel, vehicle and medical insurance at preferential prices | • Corporate current account  
• MPower Biz Accounts (current account designed for SMEs, professional firms, JVs, NGOs, churches, schools)  
• Staff Accounts (everyday banking, premier savings, instant savings)  
• W Business Power Loans (trade credit, business overdraft, vehicle, facility upgrade, commercial mortgage, office equipment)  
• Employee services (pay day advance, credit cards, mortgages, school fees advance, vehicle financing) |
| Non-Financial Solutions | • Access to W Community online network  
• Discounts on shopping, health and beauty products, dining, leisure and travel  
• Mentoring program  
• Career development workshops and seminars  
• Networking opportunities  
• Recognition through awards  
• Professional guidance on personal finance and cash management | • Access to W Community online network, including information on family finance matters, home and family articles  
• Discounts on health, beauty and fitness  
• Scholarship Award opportunities for students  
• Seminars on family building and parenting | • Access to gender-trained business banking officers who provide advice and guidance  
• Access to panel of business advisors (lawyers, accountants, tax experts, auditors, consultants) at preferential rates  
• Invitation to business education, financial management, leadership seminars, networking events |
Maternal Health Service Support

Noticing that many women in Nigeria were taking out loans to pay for fertility-related issues, Access Bank introduced its Maternal Health Service Support (MHSS) as part of the W Initiative, cutting across all three segments. The MHSS offers women a heavily discounted loan to be used for these purposes, with interest rates that are significantly lower than the standard retail loan. Though less profitable than other loans for this reason, the MHSS positions Access Bank as being responsive to women customers’ needs and helps solidify its reputation as a relationship-based bank for women in Nigeria. Access Bank has also recently entered into a partnership with a health management company in the country that enables the bank’s MHSS customers to have 30 percent of the cost of the procedure covered in the event that it is ineffective on the first try.

Financial Innovations

The financial solutions for each segment were mostly built around the bank’s existing products. Access Bank also found that several modifications were required for certain savings and credit products. Aimed specifically at closing the finance gap for women business owners, the bank recently launched the W Business Power Loan as part of the W in Business CVP. Eligibility is restricted to businesses with female ownership of 50 percent or more and those that are managed by women. Loan amounts available range between N1 million (US$2,750) and N100 million (US$280,000), with an extremely competitively priced interest rate — generally lower than other financial institutions in the market. As part of the W Power Loan initiative, the bank is partnering with PricewaterhouseCoopers and two local firms to offer business support services to help enterprises prepare for borrowing if they are not yet ready.

To motivate savings behavior, Access Bank developed a series of savings products based around women’s life cycle goals, such as buying a home or saving for children’s education. The savings products feature both short- and long-term schemes for monthly deposits and offer a higher interest rate than the bank’s other savings products, with increasing rates as monthly balances go up. In addition, customers that maintain a certain minimum balance are eligible for quarterly drawings for prizes like vacations, cars, scholarships and even new homes, with entry ticket numbers increasing based on the account’s balance “status.”

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Expanding Reach

To increase its reach into the Women’s Market, Access Bank began seeking out more non-traditional channels where women tend to be active, such as faith-based organizations. The bank offers these organizations a variety of special services, including financial literacy and skill-building programs designed for church staff and youths, and solutions to facilitate donations. So far, the bank has established relationships with 2,500 churches in 36 states across Nigeria. In addition to banking with Access Bank themselves, many of these churches have Access Bank POS machines – enabling better bank access for regular church attendees and helping the bank to stay top of mind. The bank holds events in the churches around holidays like Mother’s Day, with these events serving as networking functions and also helping to promote the W Initiative, increase account activity and cross-sell, and bring in new customers. The 2018 Mother’s Day events alone garnered an additional N101 million (US$278,000) in fixed deposits for the bank.
Listening to the Customer: Prioritizing Non-Financial Services

Access Bank designed a robust suite of non-financial services to offer women in each segment the support they needed at every turn. All together, these non-financial services now reach more than 2 million women in Nigeria and across Africa. They have also proven extremely valuable to the bank from a reputational and new customer acquisition standpoint:

**Mentoring**: Primarily targeting the W in Business clients, this platform seeks to enable women to improve business skills through the provision of both local and international mentors. The bank partnered with the Cherie Blair Foundation's Mentoring Women in Business platform to coordinate the process and provide mentors. Access Bank clients get priority with mentor assignments, but the program is open to all Nigerian women. More than 100 women have submitted applications to the program to date.

**Networking**: The bank holds special events and offers digital spaces dedicated to creating connections among women clients. To date these include nearly 100 business networking and holiday-focused events – which are targeted at all segments – as well as WhatsApp groups that enable participants in many of the workshops to maintain individual networks of support following the events. Some groups have as many as 250 participants and are quite active, with women making new connections and finding business opportunities regularly. The bank also sometimes leverages these groups as an easy way to deliver educational programming, offering a 60-minute presentation and Q&A session via WhatsApp with a business leader or inspirational woman.

**Recognition**: Seeking to highlight the W Initiative expansion and acknowledge outstanding women across segments, in 2015 the bank held its inaugural W Awards. Access Bank received over 10,000 applications for the awards. Categories included Female Entrepreneur of the Year, Professional Women of the Year: Young Professional, Professional Women of the Year: Seasoned Professional and Amazon of the Year. In addition, Access Bank published a book in late 2015 celebrating the achievements, contributions and strength of 100 women who have helped shape Nigeria called “Power of 100.”

**Education**: Access Bank holds multiple events each year under its W Academy educational series, with reach across the country. The events are tailored to each sub-segment’s needs. The vast majority of the bank’s events are free to attend, with the only exception being its flagship Womenpreneur Business Workshop. This program offers a certification from the Enterprise Development Centre, Pan Atlantic University, as well as access to a variety of tools and resources for businesses. Fees to attend are nominal: N7,500 (US$20) for bank clients and N10,000 (US$28) for non-customers. Nearly 95,000 women have been trained at W Academy events in almost 500 sessions to date across 94 states. Over 1,000 women who previously did not bank with Access became customers following attendance at an event.

**W Academy Sessions**

- **All Segments**: Demystifying Bank Loans, Breakfast with W (life and business tips from successful women from all segments)
- **Young Professionals**: Investing in Tomorrow Today, Professional & Business Etiquettes, Personal Effectiveness to Speed up Your Career
- **W and Family**: Financial Fitness for Women, Family Health Nutrition and Wellness, Kids Don’t Come with Manuals, Finishing School for the Socially Savvy Moms and Her Teenagers
Delivering Effectively

The market research also revealed the opportunity to improve delivery and ensure that RMs were effectively reaching women customers. Access Bank partnered with IFC to develop bank-wide Gender Intelligence trainings – reinforcing with its RMs the importance of relationship-based banking and teaching them more about women’s sales preferences. The bank also reinforces this messaging regularly throughout the year as well as every day during the month of March – Women’s Month – with bank-wide internal communications campaigns, showcasing information on the W Initiative, offering tips to the workforce on relating and responding to women customers, and featuring information on women’s contributions to the bank from both a customer and staff perspective.

The entire sales force and call center employees are also trained on the various products offered under the W Initiative so they can provide more tailored solutions for each specific segment. Trainings are delivered both in-person and via phone conference as part of the roll-out process for any new products, on a monthly or weekly basis depending on the complexity of the product being launched. In monthly and weekly meetings, frontline staff also discuss with managers their challenges in serving women and how they might do better in the future.

“We are very proud of having achieved full buy-in for the W Initiative across our bank. The tone for this is set from the top – more than one-third of our board is female.”

- Mosun Belo-Olusoga
Chairman, Access Bank Plc

Positioning the Brand

Exploring the overall messaging that would best speak to the Women’s Market segments it was targeting, Access Bank settled on an emotionally evocative communications strategy that put the bank’s role as partner and adviser at the forefront. Access Bank uses clear, simple language in its marketing and communications efforts, seeking to highlight itself as a sustainable, woman-focused organization, a driver of financial inclusion and bank of choice for women.

To deliver its messaging, Access Bank sends 24 newsletters each year and leverages its W Community digital platform. It also has a presence on a variety of social media networks, where it has seen a great deal of success: Between 2016 and 2017 the bank’s Twitter followers grew 1,400 percent, from 3,300; Facebook followers increased 164 percent, from 7,300; and Instagram followers grew 100 percent, from 1,000.
Creating Links Across Africa

With the success of the *W Initiative* in Nigeria, Access Bank made the decision to expand the program to its subsidiaries in Ghana, Rwanda and Zambia in 2015. The three new markets conducted their own market research, then took the blueprint from Nigeria and identified what they could apply to their own markets. The results have been strong and have reinforced the bank’s leadership in its home market as the *W Initiative* is now recognized as a pan-African brand. In Ghana alone, the program has trained 48,000 women with career, health, family, business and financial workshops since its launch; the *W Initiative* has enabled 295 percent growth in women customers; and loans to women have increased by 40 percent.

What Banks Can Learn from Access Bank’s Journey

1. **Women are not a homogeneous market:** Determine which segments you wish to target, and identify their distinct needs and characteristics before developing a strategy that is tailored for each.

2. **On products, don’t reinvent the wheel:** Most existing products will work well for women; the key often lies in providing appropriate information to help them understand what will meet their needs. Innovate on products to fill any gaps you see.

3. **Programs can be expanded across subsidiaries:** Successful Women’s Market blueprints can be applied to other markets, but programs must be tailored to local market intricacies.

W Initiative Today and Tomorrow

With a now long-established history of serving women, Access Bank has become a top bank for women in Nigeria. Since 2014, the bank has brought in 1.6 million new women clients, provided N17 billion (US$46.7 million) in financing for women’s businesses and N10.6 billion (US$29.1 million) in personal loans to women. Women now represent 31 percent of the bank’s portfolio – up from 27 percent in 2014. The bank intends to increase that number to at least 33 percent by 2022, with 11 million engaging with *W Initiative* offerings.

To achieve this goal and stay ahead of the competition, Access Bank is planning to offer expanded non-financial services, including a Mini MBA program and new capacity building trainings. They are also planning to continue to roll out the *W Initiative* to their other holdings in Africa, with Gambia, Sierra Leone and the Democratic Republic of Congo coming next.