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Robin Wilson has a line at Bed Bath & Beyond. But she still hasn't been able to secure the financing she needs to keep her business growing

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Robin Wilson feels like she's tried everything.

Wilson, the founder of Robin Wilson Home in New York City, has a line of bedding basics at Bed Bath & Beyond. She had a custom cabinetry line sold at dealers nationwide. She works with design clients. She's been interviewed on NBC's "Today Show" and featured in *O, The Oprah Magazine*.

But Wilson can't get the money she needs to keep her business growing.



PHOTO BY TAMARA BECKWITH / NEW YORK BUSINESS JOURNAL

Robin Wilson at her New Jersey home. She founded Robin Wilson Home and is an author, designer and clean living guru.

"I've been to angel. I've been to seed. I've been to SBA. I've been to line of credit. I've done the credit cards, check. I've done the personal savings, check. I've done the 'bring in revenue with your company,' check. And I got friends and family, check," Wilson said. "The only way to go to the next level is to have someone say they will fund your company to the tune of several million dollars."

Wilson is frustrated that she can't get funding, considering her business' success over the years. She was an early leader of eco-friendly design after she grew up with allergies and asthma in Austin, Texas.

She's in a potentially hugely profitable space — more than 25 million Americans have asthma, and more than 50 million experience some kind of allergies each year, both of which can be triggered by irritants in the home. And on top of that, the Black consumer market is huge, too, Wilson said.

Yet she can't seem to break through in the way she needs to to achieve the next level of growth.

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Wilson believes, based on the feedback she's gotten in various interviews and from friends, that being Black is what's preventing her from getting financing. It feels to her like for every hurdle she jumps, a new one is created.

"I've done TV interviews, I've gone to banks, I've gone to lenders. It's an institutional bias, whether covert or overt," Wilson said.

Wilson founded her business about 15 years ago. She had been working at executive search firm Heidrick & Struggles when it went public in 1999. The company's initial public offering gave Wilson enough money to be able to pursue her passions, she said, of design, project management and real estate. That's when she started Robin Wilson Home.

In 2009, Wilson's custom cabinetry line, made in the USA, was picked up to be sold at 400 dealers nationwide. She said that generated \$82 million wholesale, of which she got a licensed percentage.

"Did I get one person, VC or otherwise, to say, 'You've got a business'? Nope," Wilson said.

She paid for advertising for the line out of her own pocket, using credit and friends and family funds, she said.

Around that time, she got a licensing deal for her line of basic bedding to be carried in more than 320 Bed Bath and Beyond stores. Still, her financing trouble continued.

"Could I get seed capital? Nope," Wilson said. "This is the big exclamation point — not even a line of credit at my local bank. [They told me] 'you don't have all your accounts with us.' [Meanwhile] I'm maxing out the credit cards."

Wilson said the bank told her she could take out a loan and personally guarantee everything, which would mean mortgaging her house and signing off her car, something she wasn't willing to do. The SBA would have also required her to personally guarantee everything, she said.

"This has been the challenge," Wilson said. "Look at the world in which we live. It's all about clean design. It's all about home ... I've been around 20 years, and as one would say, I've spent everything I have."

Earlier this year, the death of George Floyd while in police custody in Minneapolis sparked protests nationwide. Some consumers began actively looking for Black-owned businesses to support, and magazines compiled lists of products. Wilson's line was included on a *New York* magazine round-

up of living-room décor.

Overnight, orders exploded. Wilson said sales went up 3,000% in four weeks. "There was a call from my distributor, 'What'd you do?' " she said. "All of a sudden, I've got a viable business again."

Soon afterward, a hotel group called her and ordered 56 pallets of her textiles, her biggest order ever, and partnered with her to come up with a candle for its gift shops to help promote her brand. The group has placed more orders since.

"They've never patronized a B2C Black-owned business ever, and they decided to vote with their wallet," Wilson said.

Over the past few months, things have quieted down. She said sales are still up about 25% now, but that's not as dramatic as earlier this year. Going into the holiday season, she would love to be able to pay for an advertising blitz to capitalize on the attention, but she said it's difficult to do that out of her own pocket.

"Doors need to open. Companies need to vote with their wallet and bet on a racehorse that's been around for 20 years fighting the good fight," Wilson said. "Give me a chance, stop raising the bar, start looking at who you have given money to ... I have product that sells, that people buy, working class and rich. We're at the price point where for some, it's aspirational, for others, it's right on target, and for others, it's cheap."

Her frustration is largely because her business has seen success. It's not just a concept on paper.

"I get revenue and products, not just an idea, and I select a niche long before anyone else that's focused on hypoallergenic, eco-friendly lifestyle spaces," Wilson said. "I can't get funding."

Her greatest hope?

"Someone is going to raise their hand and say, 'My God, we need to give this person a chance,' " Wilson said.

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