Digital Dynamism: How IT and Social Media are Enhancing Business Opportunities for Sri Lankan Entrepreneurs

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Abstract

As the Sri Lankan economy attempts to transform into a more value-added and knowledge-led one, recent advancements in technology and innovation have created a plethora of new opportunities for small and medium-sized enterprises. This paper provides four case studies of innovative enterprises and initiatives to demonstrate how the digital economy is enhancing the country's business potential and creating jobs. The firms studied are all start-ups run by young professionals (between 28-35 years) and are specifically unique to show the range of possible benefits. The aim of this initiative is to shape a new narrative around the use of IT and social media for entrepreneurship in the future.

Key words: competitiveness, entrepreneurship, innovation, SMEs, technology

JEL codes: M13, M15, M21, M37, O31, O33

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Introduction

Across the world, the digital economy is creating new opportunities to do new things and to do things better, both commercially as well as socially. Mobile and social media solutions, e-commerce, cloud computing, and big data analytics are creating new possibilities for products and services and creating new value for firms, economies, and societies at large. How well and how quickly Sri Lanka adopts these will be a key determinant of growth in future years. This collection of case studies explores examples of innovative enterprises and initiatives that demonstrate business potential in Sri Lanka, but also highlight the key challenges that must be tackled. The cases were selected[1] to cover a unique mix of examples, going beyond those that are often written and talked about. The aim of this initiative was to shape a new narrative around the use of IT and social media for entrepreneurship in Sri Lanka.

As Sri Lankan economy attempts to transform into a more value-added and knowledge-led one, technology and innovation offer new opportunities for growth and dynamism. A 2012 IPS Working Paper – 'Fostering Innovation to Fast-forward Growth in Sri Lanka' – identified the need to have a focused, coherent, and holistic approach in driving the innovation agenda in Sri Lanka if the country is to avoid the middle-income trap, achieve and sustain faster growth rates, and raise incomes and living standards across the country. Following this report, Google Asia-Pacific and IPS explored a few case studies that highlight new examples of innovative enterprises and initiatives that demonstrate Sri Lanka's potential, but also highlight the key challenges that must be tackled. The cases were selected to cover a unique mix of examples, going beyond those that are often written and talked about. The aim is to shape a new narrative around innovation and entrepreneurship in Sri Lanka.

These case studies explore how digital tools are disrupting traditional business models - individuals and organisations that are using cloud-based applications to work in lean and smart teams; are using social media beyond taking 'selfies' to boost self-employment; are providing additive manufacturing solutions; and are taking advantage of new funding opportunities to launch new marketplaces. All these 'disruptions' are driving new sources of competitiveness among SMEs. SMEs are

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[1] The case studies were prepared by Anushka Wijesinha under a joint initiative of Google Asia-Pacific and IPS in 2014.

recognised for their ability to be more nimble and innovative than larger firms (ESCAP, 2012). Technology is offering them new potential to enhance their competitiveness.

The case studies were selected based on the fact that each provides a unique perspective on the emerging uses of new technologies by Sri Lankan entrepreneurs; that they are all start-ups by young professionals (between 28-35 years); and that they demonstrate how whether it is sophisticated technologies like 3D printing or simple social media and software applications, IT is no longer the preserve of large corporates or high-tech businesses alone, but small and start-up entrepreneurs operating in niche markets. These case studies may seem simple examples of small initiatives, but have far-reaching implications on larger issues of entrepreneurship, innovation, competitiveness, small business promotion, and labour market participation.

1. 3D Concept Studio: Pioneering 3D Printing Venture Helping More Sri Lankans Become 'Makers'
2. Trekurious: A Travel Start-Up Using Online Collaborative Tools to Stay Lean and Grow
3. Stripes & Checks Inc: Bringing the Best of A Neighbourhood Tailor To Your Desktop
4. Bakes by Bella: A Home Baker with Instant Success Through Instagram

1. Pioneering 3D Printing venture helping more Sri Lankans become 'Makers'

Pioneered in Sri Lanka by Mr. Nissanga Warnapura and his 3D Concept Studio (3CS) in 2013, 3D printing is changing the landscape of manufacturing in Sri Lanka. By being able to 3D print a new mould design, a mock-up of a new product, develop a prototype quickly, or produce a customized plastic component, this new technology is offering endless possibilities for large companies and SMEs alike.

The idea for 3CS came to Mr Warnapura quite by chance. "I have seen 3D printers and have heard a lot about 3D printing. Last year I had an injury and had to stay home for a while with nothing to do, and during this time I decided to order a printer, to start 3D printing as a hobby. It was so very simple – I spoke to a number of suppliers who I found online, did an analysis of all the machines and all the pros and cons and the pricing of what I can afford". To finance the project, apart from some of his own funds, he approached a few investors through the nascent angel investment community in the capital Colombo, and convinced them to come on board. Subsequently he expanded the number of printers and also the nature of the service offered (helping clients move from simple replication to original designs, by hiring a full time designer to develop their ideas).

As business expanded, 3CS has moved out from the owner's home, to a start-up incubator space at 'Orion City' – a tech park – to a dedicated design and print studio in a business park. Since his first 3D printing machine, 3CS has now grown to having around a dozen printers offering various different options (flexible vs. rigid, single vs. multiple colours, finer vs. rougher finish, etc).

3D printing is part of process known as additive manufacturing where an, object is created by adding materials layer by layer. It allows designers to create complex parts at a fraction of a cost and time of standard means like forging, moulding and sculpting. The most commonly used material is plastic, but newer, more sophisticated machines are capable of printing using many other materials, including human cells. In a 'prosumer' 3D printer, a reel of renewable bio plastic is spooled to the back of the device, and when the printer receives the data file, it melts the plastic on to the plate where it instantly cools into shape. It does this one layer at a time, until a fully formed structure emerges.

Mr. Warnapura says that being able to connect to the global community of 3D printing has really helped him learn fast and get access to a lot of rich resources, quickly. "On sites like Makerbot – the company that also makes printers – we have access to a wide variety of shared 3D printer files which we can use to get standard shapes and designs. There are a lot of folks in the Computer-Aided Design (CAD) community out there and there are a lot of different communities that offer printing models. Even the Ultimaker brand of printers has its own community called 'You Imagine'. Being part of these global online communities gives us access to so many open-source models that we can download and also use to customize to our own requirements".

1.1. Creating something new

The 3CS founder remarks that people go through different phases in 3D printing. "When people are new to 3D printing, the first phase is duplicating; they see something and say 'we want that'. Then in the next phase they go into modifying. But they soon get in to the third phase - creating. That is what we want to be in. Helping people create things. Very few of our customers come to make a standard object now; they look for modified or customized objects. For instance, young engineering students creating customized PCB housings for electronics creations. And when I say SMEs, I see it broadly - they may be students now, but they will be the next generation entrepreneurs, the next SMEs", he asserts.

The company has also catered to some of the country's biggest corporates - Hemas, Orange Electric and Unilever – but the real value of 3D printing is that it is accessible to both large and small firms alike. This method of production has democratized the ability to create , and is especially beneficial to SMEs that often struggle with minimum order quantities and face problems with requests by large mould and sample manufacturers.

1.2. Accessibility

The transparency of pricing is appealing to customers and making more of them comfortable with their first foray into this new technology. "We charge per centimeter cubed and per minute because when you put a model into the printer, it tells you how

many hours and centimeters cubed of material will be used. So it tells me the actual consumption of the machine. I am able to tell this to the customer and they understand that there is complete visibility into our process", Mr. Warnapura says.

3D printing is able to cater to the needs of even the smallest enterprise with little prior experience with such technology.

"You can just give a sketch of what you want – there's no need even for a CAD file, we can do it for you. The fact that this wall is broken brings great accessibility. Couple that with affordability, and you create an opportunity for someone", he says. For SMEs looking to prototype something new, for a small manufacturer wanting to try a new design or a new shape, this is an excellent option. Mr. Warnapura observes that, "Often, start-ups wanting to make something can't get far, because moulding companies will say all sorts of things – like minimum quantities, limited colour options and so on. But 3D printing is helping start-up guys go almost as close to established guys very fast. There really is no reason why you shouldn't use 3D printing".

Recently, a new start-up fashion accessory brand - Kantala, which produces fashion accessories with local arts and crafts, used 3D printing to create a mould of a phone to use when designing their latest phone case. "3D moulds are a cost effective and accurate way of making sure the fashion accessories we make for tech accessories have the perfect fit", remarked Nadishan Shanthikumar, a co-founder of the brand.

Mr. Warnapura's new focus is making this technology available for students and new entrepreneurs. He has been doing a lot of workshops and awareness sessions in schools and universities. He is keen to demonstrate how 3D printing has truly democratized the ability to not just replicate existing things, or even just simple customized products, but rather create completely new and exciting things. His new 3D print studio is aimed at fostering exactly that. As he explains, "My goal is for people to come in here, sit down, design and mould, and create new things; all in one place. This is what is going to boost the 'makers' of this country".

Globally, 3D printing is already revolutionizing the ability of inventors to do 'rapid prototyping' –a key stage in the research and development (R&D) process. In Sri Lanka, with a low level of R&D at present (less than 0.2% of GDP) and high R&D costs, 3D printing can break down barriers for more inventors to come closer to commercializing their ideas. It is offering breaking down the barriers to R&D for

established firms too, as they can innovate new product lines quicker and more nimbly with the use of 3D printed moulds.

2. A travel start-up using online collaborative tools to stay lean and grow

A new travel and lifestyle company, Trekurious, is taking advantage of the growing availability of cloud-based productivity- enhancing and collaboration software and applications to keep a lean operation and still grow the business. The interest of its founder, Mr. Rukmankan Sivaloganathan, in seeking out these 'little cheats' as he called them has pushed the performance of the Trekurious team.

For many start-ups and new entrepreneurs, the costs of operating a business in the early months and years with little to no cash flow coming in, is a daunting thought. For these enterprises, the luxury or having clerical or administrative staff, or secretaries to manage schedules and calendars is almost unheard of. A handful of team members work on almost everything. Trekurious is one such start-up, that is fast growing in their offering of unique experiential travel and lifestyle services, but without a growing administrative burden. Software applications ("apps") available on computers and mobile devices – commonly referred to as 'online productivity tools' are now ubiquitous among many organisations around the world. They range from email inbox management apps, to file storage and retrieval apps and task manager apps. Many of these tools used by Trekurious are the secret to the company's ability to take on more clients while keeping costs low.

Trekurious was born out of an idea Mr. Sivaloganathan had when he was an MBA student at INSEAD and handled the school's graduate trips to Sri Lanka. He was left constantly frustrated by how tourism in the country was handled, and wanted to forge a better way of doing it. His big idea of connecting local experts to tourists came to him while on travel to Vietnam, when his group's tour guide fell ill and the tour company had hired a local archeologist to guide the group. Trekurious was born out of this idea, with a view to delivering great experiences to tourists and locals alike.

Trekurious started with Mr. Sivaloganathan and just one other employee and so collaboration in the early days of the business was easy. But as the business started to expand and more staff were hired the team began using online productivity tools to keep costs low. "From day one we used Google Drive and Dropbox. They were our

mainstays". The Trekurious team uses Dropbox to simply store files and Google apps to manage contact lists and stay abreast of product development and sales pipelines. "We realized that Dropbox is binary – someone does it and saves it. Whereas on Google Drive, we can have multiple people working on one document at the same time".

As their clientele expanded and the services they offered increased, they came up against another challenge – keeping track of all the new enquiries and new opportunities. "We then needed something to track all the work because we started to get inundated with emails", Mr. Sivaloganathan explains. With a very small team and no dedicated administrative staff, things could always 'slip between the cracks' and the founder needed to avoid this. The first tool they used was called ToDoist – a free app available for Apple and Android devices. But the application was not as sophisticated as it is now and was a lot more "bare bones", as he put it. "Adoption was poor in the team, and it did not catch on initially". They then tried another app called Trello – another collaborative tool that can assign reminders and to-do notes. This too saw good initial adoption but then fell behind. "This is a classic challenge – a lot of companies face this. When they introduce new technology, and new productivity tools it only works if everyone starts using it", the founder argues.

Much of the adoption of productivity tools at Trekurious followed a trial and error approach, as the team learnt what their needs were and as the tools themselves kept undergoing interations. That many of these tools are available for free download and do not require costly subscriptions and long-term commitments, enables this sort of flexible approach.

The founder kept looking at various other options to see what best suited the needs of the small team at Trekurious, but in the context of a growing business. Tools like Basecamp and Asana were also looked at, but were found to be far too complicated. They also tried WeDoist, which was similar to ToDoist but for teams but that too didn't' work.

Subsequently, months after first trying ToDoist, the app had came out with a new iteration which the team found to have much better functionality. "It gave us the ability to track projects, have labeling, and excellent search functionality. And now we've started using it". He attributed the reason for strong pick up this time around because of the individual functionality that it offered in terms of personal time and personal

calendar management. Each of the team members is able to use it on their own to manage workflows, but also to assign tasks to others. It also has greatly facilitated collaborative projects among the Trekurious team. He notes that, "So far adoption has been decent. But I'm still looking at whether it's really the right tool."

He is currently exploring a new tool called 'Slack', which he dubbed "the hottest start up in Silicon Valley". Slack is touted as an internal email replacement, to avoid overuse of email but still enable collaboration. The Trekurious founder is a strong believer in this work ethos. "Internally we must use collaborative tools like these, and use email to only communicate with external parties and stakeholders", he asserts.

As the team at Trekurious has grown bigger, they have upgraded much of the free online tools to the premium versions, for instance bumping up their Dropbox storage from the free service to a 1TB premium service. This scalability is a key advantage for a start-up – starting small, and paying incrementally as the needs of the company evolve.

2.1. Internal streamlining

Mr. Sivaloganathan also uses inbox management tools like Boomerang and Mailbox to ease his email burden. "Boomerang, an add to Google mail – allows me to choose to type emails and send it at a scheduled date and time. You can also have an email 'boomerang' back to you if recipients do not or boomerang back regardless. I can also look at anything I don't want to deal with right now, click on the boomerang button and select when I want it sent back to me - whether it is later today, tomorrow afternoon, tomorrow morning, or on a specified date and time next week." On the team's mobile phones, they use Mailbox – a tool that Dropbox bought just 100 days after it was launched. It contains the features of Boomerang built-in to the email inbox, specifically for mobile devices. "We are constantly looking to use all these productivity tools and cloud computing to make our lives easier. It's largely about inbox management".

The Trekurious founder also uses cloud-based tools to manage his new ideas and notes from meetings. "I use Evernote to take down and save notes and access them from anywhere on any device. I can also save images, articles, and other things that I need to refer later".

But what makes a good collaborative or productivity tool for a small start-up? What makes a founder and his or her team decide which ones to go with? Mr. Sivaloganathan responds with an interesting analogy. "Its like a good tax system – the foundation of it is that it has to be easy to collect; the cost of collection should not outweigh the revenue. So the first aspect is that any tool we choose has be fundamentally easy to use". The second aspect, he argues, is that the tool shouldn't be more complicated than the needs of the team and the company. "We are not an out and out tech company, and we don't get a lot of project management capabilities. Because of that, Asana and Basecamp are too much for us. I did cursory studies on these two and spoke to people who use it. I realized that take up with be tough and it would be 'over kill'. We wanted something much lighter. We need basic task management and collaborative tools".

But as a founder, how does he ensure that there is maximum take-up? Is it imposed from the top or does it evolve? Mr. Sivaloganthan is keen to emphasize that he hasn't used the top-down approach just yet. "I'm not yet sure if ToDoist is the 'holy grail'. If and when we figure out if it is, or whether to get something else – then I would probably make it mandatory. The best way, then, is to tell the team - if it's not on this platform, it's not there!"

2.2. Upgrading, incrementally

New apps that offer various functionalities on similar lines are continuously emerging, iterating based on what people want. But this isn't too much of a concern for the Trekurious founder. "As long as whatever we start using meets our purpose, additional bells and whistles don't matter. Even if something better comes along we probably won't take on every new thing that comes along. As long as it meets our requirements, we will stick to it", he explains. He goes on to argue that the ones that they hear about and start using are often the ones that have emerged from the murky pool of new apps, so these are the winners that are likely to receive further funding and keep getting improved.

One might begin to wonder whether all this uptake of productivity tools at Trekurious is because the founder is keenly following the evolution of these tools and eager to put them to use. But Mr. Sivaloganathan argues otherwise. "I don't know if it has to

be the founder – in our case it is. But someone in the team should realize it and say it. A start-up has to have the culture where anyone can suggest new things or it has to be that the start-up has to have a founder who's very savvy and constantly trying to introduce something new."

When asked what he would say if he given a scenario in which Trekurious was still doing the same business, but without any of these tools (except of course for email). "I can't even begin to imagine", Mr. Sivaloganathan replies without hesitation. "We'd be doing documents and emailing them to each other. Without collaborative software or tools it will slow things down a lot, a lot of things would be let go and a lot of new business would get missed, without any tools to assign tasks and projects quickly, easily and properly and follow up on time. And we'll be using a lot of paper! We will constantly be looking for these little cheats that'll help make our lives easier".

Sri Lanka is seeing a gradual shift in the entrepreneurial culture, with many new graduates – educated both in Sri Lanka and abroad – beginning small ventures across a range of sectors in the country. But as with start-ups in any country, overheads need to be kept at a minimum and small teams need to work lean and yet have big impact in terms of new business growth. The proliferation of free (as well as nominally priced) online tools that improve productivity in offices while keeping costs at a minimum, and enhance the efficiency and collaborative potential of teams, allowing them to focus on the core task of growing the company, is transforming the ability of small start-ups to scale up quickly, without the accompanying administrative burdens. This is a vastly different to the constraints that enterprises of an earlier generation would have been faced with. As the Trekurious founder remarked, "It's tough to imagine life without all this".

3. Bringing the best of a neighbourhood tailor to your desktop

An innovative trio with a commitment to style is disrupting the way men get their shirts tailored in Sri Lanka. With a unique website that offers endless customizability with ease, and an ability to deliver high quality at competitive prices, this Stripes & Checks Inc. is showing how the online and offline can come together to create new competitive advantages for Sri Lankan entrepreneurs.

"What we all have in common is our love of style. It might not be an expensive branded product but as long as it looks good and is of good quality, we liked it." This was the vision driving the founders of Sri Lanka's first online custom-made shirt enterprise, Stripes & Checks Inc. In a country where a trusted neighbourhood tailor is often the first point of call for many people seeking tailor-made clothes, a new bespoke tailoring business might seem like a challenging venture. But Gajen Vinothan, Kalana Jayasuriya, and Udara Rathnayake are determined to use the internet to change the landscape of custom-tailored shirts in Sri Lanka, with ambitions of quickly making a global presence.

3.1. Why online custom tailoring?

"We've shopped elsewhere in the world, and many of the shirts we wear are not bought from Sri Lanka. Then we thought to ourselves, there is no good place in Sri Lanka to get a perfectly fitting shirt of good material as well. That's how Stripes & Checks came about", says Mr. Vinothan, who worked in the accounting and financial analysis industry for several years, before quitting to start up Stripes & Checks.

They realized that while there are plenty of tailors who stitch shirts for men in Sri Lanka there was an opening in the market to tailor bespoke designed, made-to-measure shirts for men that can be selected and ordered online. "The perfect fit and material, the perfect stiffness of the collar - These are things you cannot get by going to a regular tailor off the street", Mr. Vinothan explains. Realizing this, they decided to start their unique venture with a promise of free delivery worldwide within 10-12 days of receiving an order.

They wanted to address the gap in the market for shirts that are perfectly fitting to your size and stitched from high quality cotton. The trio moved to set up a website that gives them the edge over other tailors who have traditional brick and mortar operations. The three schooled together and have been friends for 10 years and are from different backgrounds. While Mr. Vinothan has a background in the apparel industry, with a family-owned business in garment manufacturing (and in fact is where the shirts get stitched), Mr. Jayasuriya is a practicing lawyer and Mr. Rathnayake is the Managing Director of an export trading business.

3.2. The technology advantage

The internet is the key piece of technology that is helping make this business work, the founders acknowledge. Through its website, Stripes & Checks is not only able to immediately reach a wider market, but easily undertake the whole process of custom-tailored, made-to-measure shirts.

Once the customer logs in to the site, he has the option of providing the measurements in one of three ways – either by inserting in the exact measurements if the customer knows them, or by using the tools on the website to take the measurements, or delivering a 'best-fit' shirt of the customer to Stripes & Checks. The site has a digital mannequin and this mannequin changes according to the selections made by the customer - the colours, the styles, the materials, etc. The customers can see the shirt on the mannequin prior to confirming the order. The customization options are numerous, including a wide variety of collars, cuffs, placket, contrasting colours or materials on the cuffs or collar, buttons, etc. They currently have a wide range of materials – about 60 in stock, and intend to continuously expand the choice. "Variety is very important for customers, especially since we only do shirts. We are aiming to have 100 different varieties", Mr. Jayasuriya notes. Without having to worry about floor space like in a traditional showroom, their online presence gives the opportunity to provide endless variety to the customer. Customers can also have their initials or personal monogram stitched on to the pocket, collar or cuffs of the shirt.

The website illustrates how to best measure yourself then the customer insert those measurements. Alternatively, you can measure your perfectly fitting shirt and upload those measurements, or courier a shirt to them and the measurements will be replicated. Once the customer has finalised his specific needs, he can proceed to place the order.

They are planning to incorporate more advanced technology features into the website to give customers a 4th option for measurement. This will be an application that captures customer measurements 3-Dimensionally. You would stand about 3 feet away from a computer's webcam, and the app will sum your body measurements and upload them accurately. And easy and accurate way to capture measurements for custom-fitting clothing. The founders are working with a third-party to develop and implement this application. "Since we are doing made-to-measure

shirts, we thought this will be a perfect application to use on our website", remarks Mr. Rathnayake.

For future orders, all the customer needs to do is login with his details and he can order new items without the hassle of providing measurements again. Additionally, customers do have the option of ordering via Facebook and providing the required specifications for their shirts through that too.

Payment is through a standard e-commerce platform, and delivery is guaranteed within 10-12 days, through their courier partner DHL. In fact, delivery is free and the cost of the shirt includes worldwide delivery.

3.3. Customization and competitiveness

The founders of Stripes & Checks also hope to cater to the international market, especially Europe and US, taking advantage of lower costs of production in Sri Lanka. Coupled with the 'free worldwide delivery' proposition, if they can get their customization and designs to international standards, they stand a good chance of tapping into the international market. The founders say that their shirts are not only be more cost-competitive than other websites that offer similar services globally, but because none of their production is outsources unlike other sites, they are able to ensure better quality.

"There are actually only a handful of companies around the world that have this kind of operation and almost all of them are based in US and Europe. Going to a tailor shop there is very expensive, and that's why they have online – to cut costs", Mr. Jayasuriya observes. But the key difference between them and Stripes & Checks is that while their competitor websites get the production outsources in a different country – for cost reasons, the company does everything in-house. "We inspect every single garment that goes out from our facility here", asserts Mr. Vinothan. That control over quality, they hope, will be their leading competitive edge in the international market.

Their initial marketing has been via Facebook and via email through their personal networks. The company hopes to use online adverts and search engine optimization

in order to rank higher up on the list when people search for terms like 'custom tailoring' online.

3.4. Challenges to growth

The founders see the main challenge to their business as the limited e-commerce penetration in Sri Lanka and thus the limited market size in which they are currently operating. "We feel like we have to hang in there for a moment until people get used to purchasing these kind of shirts online, but that will happen sooner rather than later.", they assert. While focussing on making a presence in Sri Lanka, and pioneering online bespoke tailoring, they would need to quickly look beyond the country if they are to sustain a profitable venture. There is a growing market in Colombo, they acknowledge, but can't depend on it alone. "We have to look at international markets. We are charging premium prices – in the international market shirts start at US$70 upwards. So we are catering to a niche market that values quality at a higher price." When asked if they plan on taking the online offline - having a brick and mortar retail store, they remark that it's not a priority. "The model is essentially online. But if business goes well and there's a big enough clientele within Colombo, yes we might", they say.

Sri Lanka is new to innovative markets such as online tailoring. Taking into consideration the enormous number of tailors in the market, Stripes & Checks strives to ensure a step beyond traditional tailoring – the easy and instant access through the web platform, the endless customization options catering to every specification, and high quality finished products. The growth in e-commerce in Sri Lanka will no doubt be a crucial factor for a website of this nature to succeed in the country, but if they get their combination of technology and quality right, Stripes & Checks could soon be taking on established online custom-tailoring businesses elsewhere.

4. A home baker with instant success through Instagram

A young self-employed home-baking enterprise, that is taking Colombo's home-made dessert industry by storm, uses a free social media platform to reach out to her customers and generate new business interest. With zero marketing costs, except for a mobile data connection Bakes by Bella has shown how social media is breaking

down entry barriers for a newcomer, with instant access to a wide customer base that would have taken years to reach otherwise.

"I was not a mobile-friendly person at all!", says Melissa Dharmadasa, the baker behind a dessert sensation taking Colombo cake and pudding connoisseurs by storm. This is almost hard to imagine considering that her business, 'Bakes by Bella', is entirely promoted and managed through her mobile phone. Ms. Dharmadasa had always baked since she could remember, mainly for birthdays and family events, but had never explored doing it commercially. For the longest time, she had a fairly standard mobile phone until her husband gifted her a smartphone a few months ago, after which she got on Instagram.

How her Instagram presence of her baked goods really started was when she wanted to separate her baking photos from her private photos. "I had a private account, but I started one for 'Bakes by Bella' in May 2014. I just did it to separate my baking photos from my private profile and that was the only reason I opened my page it wasn't for a business", recalls Ms. Dharmadasa. Her friends began to see the Instagram feed, started following her, and a few of them started placing orders. Since they started ordering from her, she thought she ought to look into selling her baked goods on a more commercial basis.

4.1. Growing her customer base, instantly

She would ask the customers to take a picture of what they ordered and put it up on their own profiles. She would then take a screenshot of whatever they post and feature it on her Bakes by Bella page, calling it a 'fan post'. Everyone wanted "Bella's jars". They love taking pictures in creative ways with my dessert jars, and get it featured on my page". This customer engagement had created massive interest online, with more and more customers wanting to be featured on her page. Within just two months of her starting it, the Bakes by Bella Instagram profile got 1000 followers. "The moment I put up a post, I would get so many calls and messages. That's what so amazing about Instagram", Ms. Dharmadasa says excitedly. The 'fan posts' have given her unique opportunity to engage with her customers, and they began generating the most hits.

Customer engagement and fan posts have really boosted her sales. Her customers are her 'online influencers' and they are doing her marketing for her.

In order to keep the interest alive and constantly evolving, she started posting more interactive pictures – instead of still life images of her jars; pictures of her with her morning tea, pictures of her with her products, etc., but she is never fully visible in the picture. "The moment I'm with my products, there's a jump of 100+ likes. Keeping the posts continually changing, with novelty coming in often, has been one of Ms. Dharmadasa's key strengths. "My posts started off looking quite 'average'. Then I changed my style -including flowers in my posts, interacting a bit more with the products, using filters on the images - and the reach just skyrocketed".

4.2. Instagram leading to Insta-orders

There are a number of home bakers in Colombo now with each offering unique products to cater to every type of sweet tooth. So, what makes Bakes by Bella so successful? – the jar concept? the taste itself? the Instagram posts? "I can safely tell you that putting up posts on Instagram is right up there", she says without hesitation. "You have a product and it may taste absolutely amazing but if you don't present it in a certain way and in a certain style, nobody is going to want to see it and it's not going to catch my customers' attention".

Her most popular products are, of course, her dessert jars. "People love them. They are a relatively new concept in Sri Lanka". She had got the idea for the jars during her wedding, when she wanted to give dessert jars as her wedding favour and she couldn't find anyone in Sri Lanka that could do it.

For a day, Ms. Dharmadasa could have orders for as many as 40 jars, along with numerous other bakes goods like cakes and brownies. The rapid reach, rapid response for her desserts is quite remarkable. Just prior to the interview (at around 9.30am) she had put up around 3 posts, and in under two hours it had generated 7 new orders. And interestingly, 4 of those orders came via messages on the Whatsapp mobile messenger service. "I feel I interact better with the person via text message – there's a picture of the person on Whatsapp and this makes it easier to interact". Customers ask for a price list, which she sends via Whatsapp, and she takes and confirms orders via Whatsapp as well. But payment is on pick up, and she

doesn't charge an advance. She says she's surprised, but so far no one has failed to show up - "If they order its because they really want it".

4.3. Insta-branding

Starting this off on Instagram was rather accidental, but sticking just to Instagram seems intentional. "I can safely tell you now that if this was on Facebook and not Instagram, it wouldn't have happened". When asked why, she explained that unless you pay for posts, any update or photo that's put on Facebook doesn't repeat itself on a viewers news feed – it gets lost in the crowd, and even among those who have 'liked' the page, the update goes only to a limited number of them. But on Instagram, "If I keep my posts up to date, the moment someone opens Instagram it's among the first things they see, and it definitely comes up on their feed if they are following me", she says. She also noted that because Instagram posts are one at a time, unlike on Facebook with "a lot going on at the same", it gets her the market interest she wants. She claims that a lot of school students are active on Instagram, while those working full time have less time to check Instagram regularly through the day.

She also pointed out the importance of something as seemingly simple as a hashtag. "I was trying to find a hashtag that wasn't taken and #bakesbybella worked perfectly. I was nicknamed 'Bella' in university. Every picture under that hashtag now relates to my products, posted by me and posted by my fans. In essence, my brand is my hashtag!".

The young entrepreneur says she is not interested in a website right now. "I want to have a website at some point but I'm doing quite well so far. Maybe, later on. I also don't want to expand to opening up a store. Right now it's just right for me. I bake out of my kitchen - which isn't big. So it's perfect. I'm not looking to do it on a very large scale. I can take as many orders as I can, and say so no to the rest".

4.4. More women into work

Ms. Dharmadasa's example bears a lot of interesting implications for the future of self-employment in Sri Lanka. Especially at a time when the country's working age population is beginning to show gradual narrowing, it becomes essential that more and more women join the productive labour force. Currently, females account for just

34% of the 'economically active population' in the country. With a greater focus globally on flexible work arrangements and flexible business opportunities for women who choose that path, social media offers a powerful opportunity for young women to break into a market with little expenditure on marketing and branding.

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