

FAST FOOD ON WHEELS

CP Food Truck, Matrz, Chopsticks, Yummilicious, Izza Wrap, HM Food, Petuk, Food Street, Spaghetti Wheels, Munchies Republic, Hot Box, Deluxe Street Food, Bon Appetit, and the list never ends! Dhaka has become the new core of the food cart business. These are most often found in Gulshan and Banani, but now the trend is spread into the Dhanmondi area as well. So what is so special about food carts? Well apart from the delicious taste and convenience on the streets, it is a very profitable business if managed perceptively.

SECRETS OF THE TRADE

I talked with Nadvie Ahmed, Managing Director at The Cart Company. Nadvie used to have a food cart of his own before he joined The Cart Company. He gave us the inside scoop on the business management side of food carts.

Investment

To start up a food cart business you need to have an initial investment of only about Taka 50,000 Taka. This becomes seriously easy if some friends get together and take the initiative. But if you want to open up in style, with premium service and settings, then it takes around a whopping Taka 1.5-2 lakhs, that too only in the beginning.

Expenses

Normally food carts do not have expenses typical to those of a restaurant. Because you are not running your business in a fixed plot of land, there is no space rent; you are doing your business on the streets, which is basically public property. (However, there is a flipside to this, which we'll get to later.) So it's mainly down to the wages for your employees. It takes a maximum of three employees to manage your average popular and busy food cart. Even if you pay each of them Taka 8,000 monthly, you are running up an expense of Taka 24,000, which is actually just a small portion of the revenue you are going to make over the month. Apart from these there are just normal expenses related to supplies.

Revenue

Nadvie Ahmed tells us that even if you sell your minimum you will get a daily revenue of

Taka 2,500 if everything goes alright, which is at the end of the month somewhere around Taka 75,000. If business is going alright, you will earn an average of Taka 4,000 daily from your food cart. And if you manage to achieve sales around Taka 10,000, you will be making a minimum profit margin of 33%. That is exactly how high the returns from the food cart business are, says Nadvie. But with all the returns there are higher risks involved in this business.



SURVIVAL

When I asked Hasnain why it's hard to sustain the food cart business, he said, "It's easy to start because the start-up cost is not high. But there are a few reasons why it's difficult to survive: first, since it's a cart, there can be objections from the neighbourhood to where you set up your cart; second, if you can't maintain your quality, you will start to lose your customers; third, even though it's a relatively new market, you can't be making the same product as everyone else." Which brings us to the challenges in running this business.

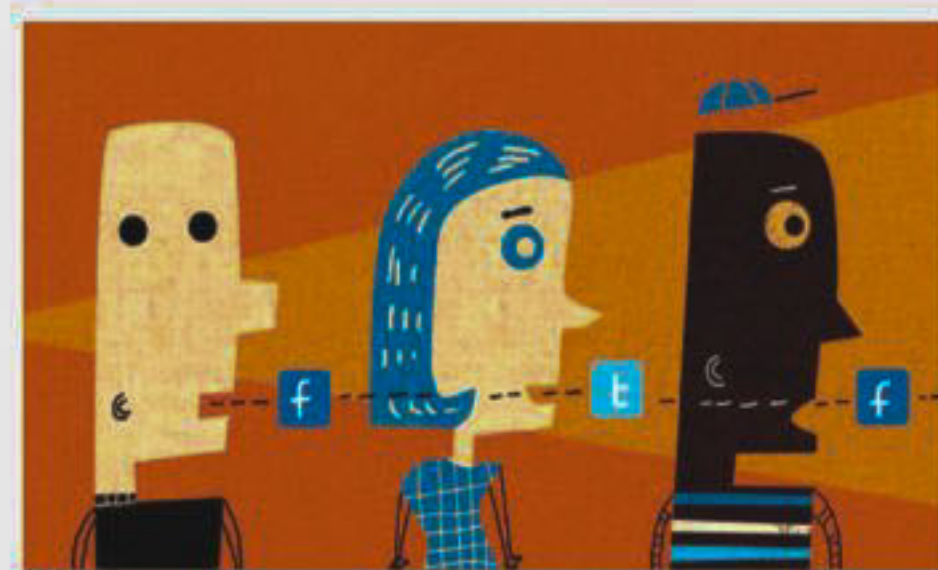
What are the challenges?

Nadvie Ahmed got into great detail with this question. First of all, the food is being sold on the streets. So, you are basically not renting the place. That means you are using public property for your business purposes. For staying on the streets you need to pay different sets of people. You need to pay the police, the city corporation, and any other political leaders who are raising subscriptions. Secondly, you cannot move with your kitchen. So, you need to stay at a place from where you can get back to your main kitchen conveniently. Thirdly, you need to put in time into the business. You need to be always informed about its location and its activities and act sharply whenever there is a setback. And in the end, your cart might be in one location today, but tomorrow it might not be there for one reason or another. And if your customers don't find you there the next day, they will go to the next place that's close by. The high competition and increasing saturation in this market are also some of the challenges of this business.

In the end, the food cart business is without a doubt one of the better things that have happened to us. In the midst of busy schedules and exhausting traffic, food carts can be a big relief. Quite the hopeful, Hasnain says, "Previously, especially in our country, hygienic street food of good quality was not available. Now it is and at a very reasonable price without compromising qual-

ity. This sector has definitely helped a lot of the youth like us to take a step forward and start his or her own business. Even though the percentage might be very small, but the entire food cart industry is helping to decrease unemployment, create jobs and expand an emerging market, to some extent."

HASIBUL ISLAM



PROMOTION

The media of promotion is chiefly Facebook. So, you virtually have to spend nothing if you are reaching sufficient people over Facebook. You can alter your choice of social media website based on your target market. For example, food blogging is a rising trend among today's youth. All of these things have made people a lot aware about their choice of food and where to get it. I asked Nadvie about managing the Facebook page. The Cart Company gets its graphic art done by Beatnik Designs, while Nadvie manages the page himself.

In the case of Hot Box, Hasnain Fahmi looks after the PR and Promotion. The three owners of Hot Box have divided the work amongst themselves, and so at least one of them is always checking the Facebook page and trying to increase audience engagement.

BEHIND THE SCENES

How the development sector works

It was hardly a surprise when a recent survey about the most preferred employers carried out by GradConnect showed that BRAC was one of the leading organizations of choice amongst Bangladesh's young graduates. While the list was primarily dominated by profit-making enterprises such as Unilever, British American Tobacco etc, the entry of BRAC in the list of 'Top 10 Preferred Employers' carried out amongst today's university-goers was not wholly unexpected.

It is perhaps difficult and mostly improbable to perceive whether any job can be as satisfying as one that relies mainly on contributing towards others. It is widely perceived by most of the people that jobs in the non-profit sector are low-paying and less easy to maintain when it comes to achieving an effective work-life balance. After all, the majority of jobs in this field involve relocating to a new place---usually a rural area---and helping the natives there to develop their society and to attain greater knowledge. However the pay, the career and the overall lifetime of a job in this field should help people look past the minor deficiencies.

Contrary to popular beliefs, remunerations in this field are quite similar to most other entry level jobs; generally starting from a mediocre Taka 15,000 or 20,000 and depending on the post one is applying for. Mid-level jobs boast a salary of Taka 21,000 to 24,000 per month, which can be considered quite high considering most mid-level jobs that pay equivalent or similar amounts.

One of the best advantages of working at an NGO would be relocation. Yes, one might have to live apart from his or

her family but most, if not all, enjoy being in a different place amidst different people. You get your own flat or house located near the site where you will work at and you will also be provided with compensation for your food and travelling expenditures. You will also get a personal car for transportation from one part of the region to another.

Sabbir Hossain Kadri, former employee at CARE, mentioned that it was a very positive experience being posted at Dinajpur for almost 7 years while he was at CARE. He was not only provided with remunerations but also with a great place to stay and all of his expenditures including for food and furniture were paid for by the company. The house was spacious so his family could also live with him during vacations and there were guest rooms for guests.

From lower level to higher level employees, most, if not all, receive 50% bonuses on both Eids, surmounting to a total of 100% bonus over the year and also a provident fund from the very beginning of his or her tenure. This is higher than what many companies are often willing to offer.

Besides, the advantage of

annually earning more than most other mid-level jobs or even some entry-level jobs is a good reason behind choosing a career in this field, while the diverse choices one faces is yet another exciting aspect of this sector. The field of development sectors and NGOs is rapidly growing and evolving, given the rapid evolution of this field that seems highly likely over the next 10 years.

The development sector in particular does receive many plaudits for its rapid evolution into a highly demanding career path that most graduates with Economics as a major often tend to head for. Not only is a career in this line one that will progress rapidly, but there is also a lot of scope for development and learning here. Most individuals, who set out on this path, emerge from the other side as highly knowledgeable. They need to be curious problem-solvers who can think analytically and reach the possible optimum.

One must also understand that non-profit companies are all learning organizations. Employees do not need to come here with top-notch grades or skills. What they must have is the curiosity, and the energy to work for the greater



good. The more you learn through your jobs, the further you can advance in your career. Barbara Stocking, the former executive director of Oxfam,

once mentioned how important it is to get into a job that is constantly developing as it acts as a catalyst to help us evolve and improve ourselves over the

course of time.

It is however evident that employees in the development sector are never there for the money. While they do get attractive compensation packages and are expected to make the organization sustainable in the long run, people in organizations like BRAC are passionate about contributing towards the development of people.

Working in these non-profit NGOs does sound intriguing and enticing, but perhaps the most dominant feature and attraction behind the allure of getting a job in an NGO would be the fact that it has the ability to give us a voice. A job in an NGO all but guarantees us that our opinions and our voice matters, and that they do create an impact at the societal level.

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