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NEXT STEP

Straight talk with Shehzad Munim

BATB's Managing Director discusses the potential of the tobacco industry

Recent times, NBR has faced challenges in collecting targeted revenue. Under this budget deficit scenario, the top three sectors (tobacco, telecom and construction) will play a critical role to ensure the revenue target for the government. The tobacco sector is by far the highest revenue generating sector. However, revenue potential from this sector is still untapped and correct measures can bring in additional Taka 4,500 crore revenue this fiscal year. Today we will talk to Shehzad Munim, the first Bangladeshi Managing Director of BAT, about the potential of the tobacco industry. BAT is one of the key players and the current market leader in the tobacco industry.

1. What are the obligations to the society that you feel as a Managing Director of such a big company?

In recent times, Bangladesh has promised a lot in many ways – our economy is moving towards a positive shift; we are showing positive outcomes in child education, health and sanitation, digital revolution, etc. We are self-sufficient in many aspects like growing our own crops and food security. We are even minimising our dependency on foreign aid. Per capita income and GDP are growing constantly. And we are taking bigger steps than ever before in developing the nation, i.e. Padma bridge.

BATB's various community development projects play a significant role in the communities where we operate. For over 50 years, we have worked with our farming communities and shared the global best practices with the Ministry of Agriculture. We have worked with various government institutions to ensure workplace safety, and to protect the environment from industrial hazards.

Our esteemed Board of Directors navigate this business so as to protect our shareholders and stakeholders. We bring out the best talents of the country and create dynamic professionals to take up leadership positions inside and outside the country.

2. Do you think Bangladesh has the right environment for the foreign investors to invest?

This has been one of the top agendas of the government this year. In recent times, the government has been adopting various interventions on policy levels to help businesses grow and support

BAT IN BANGLADESH

- BAT Bangladesh (BATB) has been operating in the country for over 100 years
- It is the only publicly listed tobacco company in Bangladesh
- BATB has been the largest tax payer in the private sector for many years and works closely with the government in revenue measures

the national economy. However, level playing field is an important area where it still needs to intervene so that foreign investors get the right environment to invest. Neighbouring country, Myanmar has brought massive changes in their policies to attract foreign investors. As a result, various international companies are now investing and setting up big operations there.

3. What are the prospects of the tobacco industry to contribute more to the national exchequer?

In the last fiscal year, we could not achieve the desired revenue target from the tobacco industry. This year, we are again on the verge of losing the untapped potential this sector possesses. If we can bring some changes in the policy level and adopt the correct measures, then we as an industry can additionally achieve Taka 4,500 crore. The measures that need to be taken are: a) increase the cigarette floor price; b) stop down-trading from higher priced cigarette to cheap cigarettes; c) provide appropriate pricing for top segments to curb smuggling; and d) reduce the complexity of our current price and tax

model.

So I believe we need proper policy evaluation and interventions to address the concerns to make this industry a sustainable one, and to contribute to our government's long-term revenue and health agendas.

4. We have seen that the percentage of smokers is decreasing globally, whereas in our country it's increasing. In fact, the lower end cigarette market is almost 65 percent of the total cigarette market, but our tobacco price is still lower than any other neighbouring country. How do you think the government can address this issue?

The government needs to seriously consider moving away from fixing the price of cigarettes. Bangladesh is the only country where the government dictates the price of cigarettes.

Percentage-based slab price increase has widened the absolute price difference between upper and lower segment. Due to this price pressure, the top three segments suffered a lot of down-trading, and over the years the lower segment volume has increased. The government should increase the price of all brands by Taka 10 per pack – this will bring in additional revenue as mentioned earlier.

5. In the last three to four years, we have seen that smuggled cigarettes are being sold in the market and local premium cigarettes are declining. How can the government solve this issue?

The government needs to maintain the price gap between premium and high segments. Local operators must be allowed to offer more competitive priced products in this zone to combat smuggling. And there is always the matter of enforcement. We have seen a lot of success stories where authorities have seized smuggle cigarettes on different occasions.

WATER COOLER CHRONICLES

CODING FOR BEGINNERS

I wanted to learn coding as a child – the job prospects in my mind were limited, true, but who needed options when I would become a master hacker infiltrating enemy computer systems as lines and lines of green code would flash across a black computer screen. A few years later, coding was something only geeks would be into, it was no longer cool – I would much rather be on the using end of the software I thought.

It was only when I took a computer course in school and had to learn the basics of, well BASIC, to pass that I was interested again. Sure, the most complex program I could write was one which would spurn out the Fibonacci sequence, but it was the thought process associated with writing a program that got me interested – there was no complex math involved, a misapprehension that puts off many. It was the way you learnt to tackle a problem that interested me. Steve Jobs had said it ages ago in the so called lost interview – "I think everybody in this country should learn how to program a computer because it teaches you how to think."

And for the past few years it seems his words are finally being heeded. The resources for learning to code are abound online. Before we delve into these, a question needs to be answered – should you learn coding? It would be hard put to find a career sector now which does not involve computers. And this will only increase more so – if you know how to code, you already have an extra advantage, the power to communi-



cate in the language of the future to put it dramatically. The number of startups that have thrived because of a smart online presence is continuously growing and an Android app to customise and order might be just what your next big burger cart is missing.

Codecademy.com is the most popular place to head to if you want to dabble in coding. Whether you want to learn HTML, CSS, Python or Ruby, head over to Codecademy. It is fun, intuitive and challenging – you can keep track of your progress throughout learning a coding language and apply it firsthand. And if you are still questioning why you need to learn coding, watch their short videos. They will inspire.

Another similar website is Code.org. This initiative is by the likes of Facebook, Google and Apple and is perfect for total newbies who don't know their flowcharts from their algorithms. Same applies for the famous Khan Academy. And the best part is, with these websites, even though you won't be building your first app within a week, you will know the basics of how coding works.

If you opt for more traditional lessons in coding, try the courses offered by MIT Open Courseware. Coursera, which offers free university courses from around the world, also has a number of coding courses you can take. And edX offers Harvard's Introduction to Computer Science course for free. If you decide to spend a little extra, you could even get a legit certificate for your new found knowledge.

Not sure which language you should learn? Ask yourself, what is it you want to do – make apps for Android or iOS, design websites or do the technical back end IT stuff? Each language serves its own purpose, so a little Googling won't go amiss. And if you do not have an answer yet, go for C or Python – both are widely used and easy to learn. The basics of how coding works are similar and if you learnt one, you can switch to another with not much trouble.

The next gen of entrepreneurs will need to find new ways to attract their customers or develop their products and services. Knowing how to code is the greatest favour you can do yourself right now. Besides knowing how to think logically never hurts anyone.

BUET hosts Career Development Workshop

For ages, the idea of a "proper" degree or career choice has revolved around either engineering, the medical sciences or mathematics. However, reality is different than what the one track minds of parents and high school teachers will have you believe: engineering graduates are regularly seen behind desks, attired in suits and ties, cash mongers for banks and corporations.

That has scope for change, however. BUET, forever the light that engineer-hopefuls gravitate towards in Bangladesh, recently hosted several department-themed festivals, with the Mechanical Engineering department holding a much needed career development workshop to guide future graduates.

Held on 12 May 2015 at the BUET Auditorium, the workshop featured eminent speakers from varied fields.

Mushfiq ul Huq started the proceedings with an inspiring lecture on his experiences as director of Creative Engineers Ltd., supplying Swiss-made Schindler lifts and escalators to the world. "China and India are facing a huge growth in demand, and the time for being closed to certain career paths in certain areas is gone. You have to keep your minds open. Market perceptions



of technology are changing, which represents a huge growth in employment opportunities."

Mushfiq also urged the fresh BUET graduates to go abroad, gain experience, but ultimately come back to Bangladesh, stating that the engineers of the country would be the ones to lead the way in the coming decade. With the global focus quickly shifting to energy efficiency and environmentally friendly technology, Bangladesh needs to stay on par, he said.

With the preliminary session over, the Chief Technical Officer of Banglalion Wimax was called on stage to speak on the necessary qualities that an engineer must possess when entering the job field. The importance of a positive mindset, the ability to adapt and adjust attitudes on the fly were touched upon. Mushab Bin Khondoker, Head of Implementation at Banglalion Wimax, gave the attendees a host of useful CV writing tips and interview board norms.

Sabbir Ahmed, Manager and Head of Sales at Bangla Cat and one of BUET's own, gave a humorous delivery, touching upon personal experiences of facing interviews.

Other notable speakers included Dr. Mohammad Ehsan, a faculty member of the Mechanical Engineering

department, Nurunabi Siddique, Senior Manager at Reve Systems, and Razeed Hyder, Managing Director at Outpave Spinning Mills and R.A. Spinning Mills Ltd.

Chowdhury M Shahriar, a recent BUET graduate, had an interesting proposition, asking graduates to grab opportunities and learn from them instead of stagnating while chasing after a particular passion: "Leaving something is easy but getting it is hard, so no harm in taking whatever you get and learning from the experience."

Ashiqur Rahman, Assistant Professor of Mechanical Engineering, had one of the last sessions on applying abroad. Although he expressed concern about brain drain, he felt going abroad was necessary because it was a way of keeping up with the world.

At the end of the career development workshop, it was evident that it was a worthwhile effort, bringing students, teachers, and industry leaders together under one roof. It's definitely a step forward in the right direction.

WORDS: SHAER REAZ
PHOTO: PRETOM SAHA DIP

MOYUKH MAHTAB

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