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NEXT STEP

ALPHA CATERING INNOVATION IN A TRADITIONAL SETTING

While most of their classmates were preparing themselves to land that lucrative MNC job, two talented friends from IBA, University of Dhaka, were busy carving a niche for their own enterprise. But Sayem Faruk and Muhammed Asif Khan decided to go against the flow and stuck to something simple: a catering business.

In today's age of technology and disruption, a traditional business can also flourish if it is positioned correctly. However, it was not only positioning, but careful planning, attention to detail, and clinical execution that led to Alpha Catering's being featured here today. We had the chance of interviewing one of the co-founders, Sayem Faruk, to know more about this thriving startup.

Take us through Alpha's journey from ideation to launch.

It all started when we were carrying out a research project on the level of hygiene and quality standards of the local food industry. To our dismay, the results were appalling—most restaurants were aggressively cutting costs and compromising on profits.

We decided the best way to change the norm was to do it ourselves. People asked us "Then why didn't you open up a restaurant?", and the simple answer is because the market is saturated. On the flip side, as caterers we can serve multiple customers at the same time. And to ensure that the facility conformed to global standards in terms of space,



Co-founders Asif and Sayem (center) with the Alpha team

Tell us a bit about the company.

Currently there are very poor hygiene standards in the industry, no product innovation, and a lack of professionalism. Alpha's vision is to reverse these trends.

We started our full-scale operations in August of 2016. Thanks to a highly experienced and talented cooking team, we can serve over seven cuisines, which we consider a competitive advantage. Bengali Indian, Chinese, Thai, Italian, Arabic, English, etc. We cater for all sorts of occasions—corporate meetings, conferences, seminars, daily lunch, home parties, birthday parties, weddings, etc. And in a span of just 6 months, we acquired a commendable client base.

We take sourcing very carefully and buy only fresh produce by alternating between bazaars. We use branded ingredients and are looking to procure directly from firms soon. It's a bit more challenging when it comes to protein, but we vet our sources to ensure best quality. Again it's better to procure from branded suppliers and we hope to do so soon.

Also, no one is allowed inside the kitchen without proper attire, not even us. There are

separate cutting boards, storage facilities, and sections, and the whole setup is CCTV monitored.

What's your team like? How do you manage?

We have a staff of 25 at present. You can divide them into three groups.

The first is the cooking team, and obviously the most important. Our Executive Chef, Nicolas Rozario, has more than a decade of experience working in the Middle Eastern catering industry. Under him, we have two sous-chefs—Andru Corraya and Leon Gomes. Besides the three, we also have four other chefs de partie. Combined, they have experience of over 120 years.

The second group comprises of the support team. They each have designated roles. Some are involved in packing food, some work in delivery, while others take care of purchasing raw materials.

The last group is the management. We have an Operations Manager, a Customer Relationship Officer, a Sales Executive, a HR and Admin Officer, an Accountant, and so on. We're hiring regularly to build a strong,



No one is allowed inside the kitchen without proper attire, not even Sayem



Alpha Catering invites all of their customers to try some of their delicious food at the kitchen in Ibrahimpur

cross-trained team.

What challenges did you face or are facing?

Since most of our clients are corporations, it takes some time to clear payments as they must follow certain protocols. Another challenge is to make consumers understand that maintaining hygiene and quality pushes up our costs relative to caterers who don't. However, our prices are still lower compared to some leading caterers.

What keeps you going despite the challenges?

We're on a mission to bring global standards to the local industry. When you have full confidence in yourself, your team, and your purpose, it's easy to jump from setbacks to setbacks with the same enthusiasm. We have had all sorts of failures and nerve-wracking crises. We know more of them are coming soon, but it's that grit that pushes us to go on day in and day out.

What is your current strategy? What clients do you cater to?

Initially we focused heavily on office lunch. Currently we serve 300 orders every day to offices, including bagdoo.com, Unilever, MGH, and Newscred. Events are much more attractive because revenues from one single corporate client can equal a month's revenue from office lunches. As such, we are now trying our best to develop relationships with corporations, universities, institutes, and event managers. We have successfully catered to the likes of BAT, ACI, Chevron, NSU, IBA-DU, ICDDR,B. Our proudest achievement is serving Dr. Muhammad Yunus at Grameen Trust's board meetings! We are also the official caterers of The City Bank Ltd.

What are your plans for the future?

We want to keep pushing continental cuisine in events. We also want to bring about changes never before seen and go beyond traditional catering. Imagine an event where you have six different stations—rural Bengali, Indian, Thai, Mexican, Italian, and Japanese. Chocolate fountains, exotic desserts, exquisitely decorated tables, smart servers, and so on. The possibilities are exciting to say the least, and we are working on them already.

How different is entrepreneurship from your perception of it? Any advice for budding entrepreneurs?

Startups are overrated. You'll end up doing uninteresting tasks that add little value most of the time. Yes, you're your own boss, but you are your own employee as well. That means you cannot skip work, you'll have your own KPIs and will be accountable to the rest of the team. But at the end of the day it feels good when customers praise your service and that makes it worth it.

Alpha Catering invited us to their kitchen at Ibrahimpur to take a look at their kitchen and try some of their delicious food, like they invite all their customers. Here's wishing Asif and Sayem and all other young entrepreneurs all the best.

INTERVIEWED BY: SHAHRIAR SHARIF

The interviewer is a sophomore at the Institute of Business Administration, University of Dhaka

Thanks to a highly experienced and talented cooking team, Alpha serves over seven cuisines

equipment and layout, we consulted Tony Khan, a celebrity chef in Bangladesh, and several other industry experts.

Are you passionate about food in general?

Absolutely! That's the primary reason we're in this business. We're not chefs, but we can brew the perfect cup of copy (laugh). We take an interest in the food we serve and how it is made. We are foodies turned businessmen.

6th BSHRM-MetLife International HR Conference to be held in March



Bangladesh Society for Human Resources Management (BSHRM) organised a press conference on January 14, 2017 on their biggest event of the year, the 6th BSHRM-MetLife International HR Conference 2017. The conference will be held on March 3, 2017 at Bangabandhu International Conference Centre (BICC), Sher-e-Bangla Nagar, Dhaka.

The ultimate aim of human resources (HR) is to provide leadership through education, networking, shared knowledge, and transfer of best practices across all sectors. The theme of this year's conference is 'Exchange to Change'. MetLife is the title sponsor.

The press conference was attended by Md. Musharraf Hossain, President of BSHRM and Asia Pacific Federation of Human Resources Management (APFHRM); Md. Mashequr Rahman Khan, Vice President of BSHRM; other high officials of BSHRM; and representatives from partners of the conference. They expect that this conference will be a great avenue for exchanging ideas and thoughts, leaning about new developments and generating a good network for continuous improvement.

Henry G. Jackson, President and CEO of the Society for Human Resource Management; Md. Musharraf Hossain; Dr. Ajantha Sujewa Dharmasiri of the University of Sri Jayawardanepura, Sri Lanka and President of the Institute of Personnel Management, Sri Lanka; and Somesh Dasgupta, National President of the National Institute of Personnel Management, India will be present as key note speakers in the conference. Many other world renowned HR experts from Bangladesh and overseas will be present as panellists in the. Nearly 1,000 human resource professionals from home and abroad are expected to participate this year.

For conference registration, call: 01790444477, 01790444411, or email: conference@bshrmbd.org.

DOCTOROLA.COM

A godsend in the country's health domain

Recent times have seen a multitude of brilliant ideas burgeoning in the startup arena of our country. One such startup, the health-tech innovation Doctorola.com, is the first Bangladeshi online platform that provides real time information on consultants and appointments through an integrated system.

BEGINNINGS

Doctorola was founded by four close friends who wanted to address the highly chaotic situation in the healthcare sector—poor accessibility and the underlying flaws in the institutional management triggering this problem. People living in places beyond the major cities face tremendous troubles in finding the right doctor at the right time and subsequently fail to secure proper treatment when they need it.

The idea of Doctorola evolved into a service platform in early 2014. Back then, it was only a doctor's directory along with a feature for appointment requests. But their whole vision was revisited soon after they realised that they also needed to build and maintain relationships with the patients and doctors to ensure smoother connection. Newer features were added and the whole platform was now being extended in the back end. Since the official launching in October 2015, Doctorola is operating in full capacity with its quick and easy-to-use website backed by a sophisticated call centre and integrated processes.

The team came up with a three-step strategy to make obtaining treatment better and faster. Their first goal was to build awareness among common people in order to prevent delay in recognising the need for treatment. The delay is mainly due to a serious lack of awareness about the signs, symptoms, and consequences of diseases as well as the lack of proper guidance. Doctorola is continuously creating and disseminating content to tap into this problem. They run medical campaigns on a monthly basis in major cities like Dhaka and Chittagong. The startup has a very active Facebook page that engages users through live content, blogs and instant responses to medical

queries. Moreover, they have also signed up with radio programmes that will soon be conducted by doctors from their network.

The second step was meant to guide patients to the right doctor at the right time in the nearest location so that the troublesome journey to major cities like Dhaka could be avoided. People typically look for or are directed to a handful of nationally renowned doctors whose appointments are obviously tough to obtain. The CEO, Mohammad Emon, says, "We create value by connecting patients to the

complete their treatment.

A BUMPY ROAD

A countrywide online platform offering services even to rural outskirts is anything but easy to execute. They had a tough time incentivising doctors and persuading them to jointly work toward making the general public's lives easier. Some top-class doctors are still sceptical to get on board.

Another major challenge is communicating effectively with mass people. As the CEO explains, "Above-the-line communication space is highly dominated

an impactful scale."

SERVICES OFFERED

Doctorola is currently handling medical requests of three types. One category involves those who seek appointments of specific top-notch doctors. If they are not on-board, alternative doctors within the required domain are suggested. The second category of patients are those unaware of the speciality area for the medical case, e.g. whether a child needs to see a paediatric neurologist or a paediatric pulmonologist. For the third category of patients, those do not know what doctor they need, there is a junior-level doctor at the call centre and on the Facebook page to guide them. Partner NGOs and private organisations also forward their cases to Doctorola.

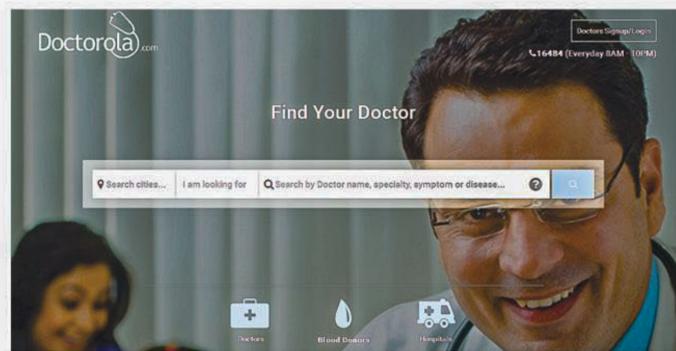
THE LONG TERM

Doctorola is open to vigorous competition in their domain, as new players in the market positively contribute to the bigger goal of strengthening people's trust in this service instead of eroding it. "We are even ready to collaborate with newcomers as well as help them grow so long as the competitive force drives the industry forward. But we do need to have a deep pocket to survive in the long run," confesses Emon.

A preliminary target of Doctorola is to escalate the appointment-handling capacity to 30,000 per day in five years. Big plans include tying with insurance companies in the near future, building a successful referral network in Bangladesh for medical treatment, as well as introducing a thorough feedback system. They also wish to expand globally to countries similar to Bangladesh, once they get a hold of things here.

HALIMA SADIYA

The writer is a sophomore at the Institute of Business Administration, University of Dhaka



right doctor, not by ensuring that a hard-to-get appointment is easily obtained." Thus, Doctorola came up with a service platform that currently hosts information and appointment facilities for more than 7,000 doctors from 437 hospitals and consultation centers in 58 districts. In the third and final stage, Doctorola proactively supports patients with follow-up appointments so that the full process is complete. They are also in the process of adding discount offers on diagnoses and other services to further encourage them to properly

by telecommunications and FMCG ads, so positioning our service through that medium is tremendously challenging and costly. Hence, we had to opt for engagement-based communication in specific segments: around 250 promoters are physically running campaigns countrywide. We are mostly self-funded and only have a small corporate investment, besides being the first Bangladeshi startup to raise venture capital. But our investment from BD Venture has indeed given our initiative some speed. However, all of it together is still not enough to communicate on