

ADN to open new digital news outlet

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

ADN Telecom Ltd is going to invest Tk 45 lakh in order to own nearly half of a digital news platform, the company said yesterday.

The board of the internet service provider has decided to subscribe to 45 percent of the paid-up capital of the proposed company, ADN Media Ltd, it said in a filing to the Dhaka Stock Exchange (DSE).

The initial paid up capital of the proposed company, which will operate as an interactive digital media platform, will be Tk 1 crore, ADN said.

ADN Telecom plans to subscribe to 45,000 shares with face value of each share being Tk 100.

The new initiative will create numerous business opportunities, the company added.

ADN Telecom's profit fell 32.18 percent year-on-year to Tk 4.44 crore in the first quarter of the fiscal year 2023-24 ending in June.

The company logged Tk 6.55 crore in profit in the July-September period of the previous financial year.



A customer browses through the selection of books at a store at the Aziz Super Market located in the capital's Shahbagh area. Publishers said sales of books outside school curriculums had fallen by 15-35 percent this year as consumers cut back on non-essential expenses due to heightened inflation.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

Booksellers take a hit from high inflation

ROBIUL KAMOL and SUKANTA HALDER

As many people, particularly those from middle-income backgrounds, tighten their belts to manage daily expenses amid high inflation, books, the food for the soul and a primary source in the quest for knowledge, have become the ultimate luxury.

Inflation and increased prices of books have quelled that thirst, at least for the moment.

Publishers said they had seen a fall in demand for books outside school curriculums as leisure readers had been forced to cut back on expenses due to higher prices of books and increasing costs of living amid persistently high inflation.

Sales of books have dropped 15-35 percent in the current year compared to 2022, they said.

Publishers said prices had risen after the cost of paper soared as a result of the depreciation of the taka against the US dollar and due to global economic factors, such as those stemming from Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

At the same time, other costs, including the cost of printing, binding and labour, have almost doubled in 2023 compared to last year.

The sales at this year's month-long 'Amar Ekushey Boi Mela', a major annual event and a peak sales period for publishers, did not live up to expectations.

Jaya Deb, who resides in the capital's Mohammadpur area, said she had two children studying in school.

Earlier, she would buy numerous books from various shops, but this year she only bought some books from the Amar Ekushey Boi Mela. After that, she did not buy any more books, she said.

"The price of books has gone up a lot.



So, it is not possible to buy more even if you want to," she added.

The book sales of Prothoma, a top publisher of the country, dropped 30 to 35 percent in 2023 compared to 2022, with sales of fiction books taking the biggest hit.

Zakir Hussain, manager of Prothoma, said a large portion of readers are middle class and were struggling to buy books as they wished.

As a result of rising costs of living and increased prices, a person who would buy five books now buys three, he said.

The Consumer Price Index in Bangladesh rose 9.02 percent in fiscal year 23, portraying the highest average inflation rate in 12 years.

That trend has continued in the current financial year of 2023-24, with inflation averaging 9.42 percent in November, figures from the Bangladesh Bureau of

Statistics showed.

Mazharul Islam, chief executive officer of Anyaproskash, another major publisher, said: "A book is a product like any other. In the current situation, sales of books outside school curriculums have decreased by 15 to 20 percent."

"Especially since the start of the Ukraine-Russia war, book sales started to decline. This is because the price of books has increased due to an increase in the price of paper," he said.

Prices of other commodities have also increased due to inflation, but people's income has not increased proportionally. So, people have cut back on the purchase of items such as books, he added.

Given the situation, publishers have reduced the number of books published, he informed, hoping the crisis would be resolved soon.

From December 2022 to December

2023, Somoy Prokashon's sales dropped 20 percent.

Farid Ahmed, proprietor of the publisher, said: "We were gradually overcoming the effects of Covid-19. Just then, Russia's conflict with Ukraine, and high inflation affected the industry."

"In Bangladesh books are not considered essentials. People buy necessities first, then they think about books. Many people have reduced their purchase of books due to inflation," he added.

According to Osman Gani, the owner of publisher Agamee Prakashani, sales of books outside school curriculums have dropped by 20 percent.

Now more books are being sold online than in shops or showrooms, he said.

He added that they had published 129 new books for last year's Ekushey Boi Mela and that they planned to publish over 100 books this year.

However, he said that when the time for the book fair came around, traders would increase the price of paper due to a rise in demand. As such, he urged the government to withdraw the import duty on paper around this time.

Sales at the Amar Ekushey Book Fair this year fell by 0.07 percent compared to 2022, said Kamrul Hasan Shayok, managing director of the Panjere Publications Limited.

Dipankar Das, proprietor of leading bookstore chain and publisher Baatighar, echoed others, also attributing the fall in demand to complications arising from Russia's invasion of Ukraine, persistent inflation, and political instability in the country.

In the US, print book sales fell 4.1 percent in the first nine months of 2023 at outlets reporting to Circana BookScan compared to the same period in 2022, Publishers Weekly reported.

Strategy for crisis communication: a must-have

EKRAM KABIR

Remember a Bangladeshi aircraft crash in Nepal and the Rana Plaza collapse? In both incidents, the authorities had to respond to the society communicating on their behalf. The aircraft company, as observed, seemed reactive, but the apparel exporters, seen in the media, were quite proactive.

The airline company was flabbergasted, but the members of the apparel club, together, knew what to say. The latter demanded some policy changes to prevent such crises. With experience, they had the wisdom of how to communicate during an emergency.

Crises, accidents, or unforeseen incidents are not a crime. They happen all the time but not every day, and that is why businesses need to be prepared: they require a crisis-time communication strategy.

We all remember the Covid-19 crisis and how companies had learnt what to communicate, what not to and when to. Covid-19 was a significant era for businesses and governments to think about formulating and implementing crisis communication strategies.

Every company, small or large, has a business continuity plan (BCP). A crisis communication strategy is part and parcel of that plan.

All we need to do is sit down as we strategise our BCP, imagining pre-crisis planning. A crisis can emerge at any time, so it is essential to have a crisis communication plan in operation. Defining potential crises, identifying stakeholders and communication channels, and designating a crisis communication team is relatively easy.



A crisis does not wait for anyone; rapidness is essential when an emergency strikes. We must respond quickly. The longer it takes, the society's narrative is likely to change and the company in crisis loses control over the narrative that would impact its customers' minds.

Courage to communicate and

accuracy in messaging are important

aspects during crises. No customer is going to kill us if we are honest. Misleading or hiding information during a situation could irreparably damage a company's reputation. Our credibility will surely skyrocket if we are transparent.

The media and the regulator expect businesses to communicate during crises. Here, during an emergency, time is of the essence of communication. So, imagining every kind of risk and preparing messages for those is paramount.

Timely communication should also accompany timely action.

We all know how Johnson & Johnson's tackled its Tylenol crisis in 1982. The company faced a grave concern when seven persons died after taking Tylenol capsules. It communicated transparently, recalled about 31 million bottles, and developed better packages. That helped it rebuild public trust and save brand reputation.

Airbnb also faced a crisis during the Covid-19 pandemic as travel restrictions impacted their business and their hosts' livelihood. The CEO communicated empathetically with hosts, offering financial support and updating their cancellation policies to balance the needs of guests and hosts.

If we had followed how New Zealand's prime minister communicated during the pandemic, we would have seen how a well-designed communication strategy can be instrumental in gaining people's trust. Her communication and decisive response strategy were clear, consistent, and empathetic. She was insanely consistent, as consistency in messaging throughout the crisis is imperative.

Every industry (and country) has its own risks and crises. But one has to have a strategy to overcome the troubled times.

The author is a communications professional

US holiday sales down from last year

REUTERS

US retail sales rose 3.1 percent between November 1 and December 24, as shoppers looked for last-minute Christmas deals amid big promotions, a Mastercard report showed on Tuesday.

The increase is lower than the 3.7 percent growth Mastercard forecast in September and last year's 7.6 percent rise as higher interest rates and inflation pressured consumer spending.

Amazon.com and Walmart ramped up promotions through November in the United States to entice bargain-hunting shoppers, but analysts said that the discounts were not as deep as the prior year, when retailers were saddled with excess stock after the pandemic.

Some of those discounts were rolled back starting in December, when customers were expected to buy last-minute gifts and household goods on the Saturday before Christmas - dubbed "Super Saturday."

AI to give fillip to industrial revolution: experts

ANN/CHINA DAILY

Artificial intelligence has the potential to revolutionise various industries, and its meteoric rise will spearhead a new technological and industrial revolution, experts said.

The fast-growing generative AI technology will be increasingly applied to a wider range of sectors next year to empower such a transformation and upgrade traditional industries, they added.

Their comments come as major Chinese technology companies ramp up efforts to launch their own AI-powered large language models, which could turn into potential rivals of ChatGPT, an AI chatbot from US-based AI research company OpenAI that has taken the world by storm and triggered a new generative AI wave after it debuted in late 2022.

Generative AI refers to computer algorithms trained with huge amounts of data capable of generating content such as images, text, audio and video. It is the key technology underpinning ChatGPT, an acronym for chat generative pre-trained transformer.

As AI potentially becomes the driving force behind innovation, companies must adapt and invest in AI to stay competitive, the experts said.

The rapid growth in AI spending,

the transformation of IT services, and the convergence of AI solutions are just a few of the significant changes foreseen in the technology landscape, they added.

Meanwhile, industry insiders said the commercial use of AI chatbots has raised concerns about how to regulate generative AI.

They called for ensuring responsible use of the technology and promoting its healthy advancement, considering the emergence of a new set of problems including ethics, privacy leakage and data security.

According to a report by global market research company International Data Corp, the announcement of the GPT-3.5 series from OpenAI in late 2022 captured the world's attention and triggered a surge of investment in generative AI, which will reshape the IT industry and the way businesses operate.

IDC expects that worldwide spending on AI solutions will grow to more than \$500 billion in 2027, and most enterprises will experience a notable shift in the weight of technology investments toward AI implementation and adoption of AI-enhanced products and services.

The IT industry will feel the impact of AI more than any other industry, as every company races to introduce AI-enhanced products or services

and to assist their customers with AI implementations, it said.

The consultancy also said that China's spending on AI will likely hit \$38 billion in 2027, and account for about 9 percent of the global market, with a compound annual growth rate of about 25 percent from 2023 to 2027.

Kitty Fok, managing director of IDC China, said Chinese companies respond faster to AI deployments compared to their foreign counterparts.

AI technology is driving digital transformation across industries, including manufacturing, transportation, energy, healthcare and retail, Fok said.



A man takes a picture of robots during the World Artificial Intelligence Conference in Shanghai. The fast-growing generative AI technology will increasingly be applied to a wider range of sectors next year to empower such a transformation and upgrade traditional industries, experts said.

PHOTO: AFP/FILE

"We are currently in a transitional stage in the application of generative AI," said Zhou Zhengang, vice-president of IDC China.

Zhou estimates that generative AI will speed up its integration with a wider range of sectors and evolve into a productivity tool next year. Meanwhile, an increasing number of industry-specific LLMs are emerging.

LLMs are AI models fed with huge amounts of text data for use in a variety of tasks, ranging from natural language processing to machine translation.

AI chatbots such as ChatGPT leverage machine learning algorithms and show strong capabilities in mimicking humanlike responses and assisting people with tasks such as writing essays and scripts, making business proposals and even checking program bugs, which they do within seconds.

A slew of Chinese tech giants, including Alibaba Group Holding Ltd, Baidu Inc, JD, Tencent Holdings Ltd, and iFlytek Co Ltd have accelerated steps to launch ChatGPT-like products, and bolster the large-scale commercial application of LLMs.

Alibaba Cloud, the cloud computing unit of Alibaba Group, recently unveiled its open-source 72 billion-parameter version of its AI-powered LLM, Tongyi Qianwen.