SMEs need strong marketing, branding: experts

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Despite contributing about 28 percent to Bangladesh's GDP, the potential of cottage, micro, small and medium enterprises (CMSMEs) remains constrained by limited finance, poor infrastructure, weak policy support, restricted market access, and slow adoption of technology, industry leaders said yesterday.

Speaking at a seminar on branding and marketing challenges for the sector at the Dhaka Chamber of Commerce and Industry, its president Taskeen Ahmed said nearly 90 percent of Bangladesh's industrial sector consists of CMSMEs. The sector employs about 1.18 crore people.

However, he noted that the additional tariffs imposed recently by the United States on Bangladeshi exports, particularly on readymade garments, pose a significant risk for the sector as they will lead to higher production and export costs.

To stay competitive, local entrepreneurs must embrace innovation, improve efficiency, and move away from outdated practices, he said. "We need to embrace technology at a faster pace and leave old-school traditional thinking and mindset, as we want to have more development for our country."

Stating that complex import-export rules, high costs, and weak global competitiveness also hold back the sector, Ahmed urged stronger support through certification, compliance, training, and incentives for sustainable technology adoption.

He stressed improving product quality and branding, expanding exports with government support, developing clusters and a CMSME database, attracting foreign investment, and supporting startups.

Also speaking at the event, Industries Secretary Md Obaidur Rahman said the absence of strong national brands has prevented Bangladesh from achieving its export potential.

The government will revise the SME and industry policies to include new and emerging business sectors, he added.

He emphasised improving product quality, branding, and IPR protection, adding that the Ministry of Industries is working to boost GI product exports.

To stay competitive, small businesses must embrace innovation, improve efficiency, and move away from outdated practices, say experts.

PHOTO: STAR/FILE

Md Saiful Islam, chairman of the Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation, said the agency is supporting entrepreneurs through industrial parks, low-cost finance, and training, while working to exempt holding taxes in its parks.

He urged expanding Bangladeshi products on global e-commerce platforms, improving packaging and labeling, and increasing international certifications to boost exports.

Mohammad Hasan Arif, vice-chairman of the Export Promotion Bureau (EPB), said consumer preferences are key to branding, stressing stronger public-private coordination.

In order to expand the presence of Bangladeshi products in the global market, he said, "First, we need to change the mindset of our local consumers."

He said the EPB will set up an Export Ecosystem Platform and a CMSME Help Desk, where representatives from relevant government agencies will be designated as focal points.

The agency will also organise training to upskill workers and facilitate Bangladeshi participation in international fairs, including one in Brazil next year, he added.

Muhammad Mustafizur Rahman, director (current charge) of the SME & Special Programmes Department at Bangladesh Bank, pointed to the importance of product logos, consumer-focused design, and promotions.

He noted that entrepreneurs can now access Tk 5 lakh collateral-free loans, with 12 percent of SME loans already disbursed without collateral by December last year.

Shamim Ahmed, president of the Bangladesh Plastic Goods Manufacturers and Exporters Association, highlighted the necessity of designing products by considering the tastes, culture, and environment of people in specific geographical regions.

Md Shafat Kadir, founder and CEO of Hat Bakso, said although reciprocal tariffs recently imposed by the United States have increased product costs, effective branding and marketing can open new export opportunities.

He stressed the need for standardised, attractive packaging, along with proper branding models and effective marketing to boost global competitiveness.

Endangered growth

MAMUNUR RAHMAN

The news on Priya's phone screen felt like a ghost. It was a report of numbers: poverty at nearly 28 percent, jobless growth. These figures seemed as remote from her life in the Korail slum as the glass towers of Gulshan. She had once believed in the "development miracle" of Bangladesh, leaving her village in the hope of joining it. Now it seemed that the miracle was a party for a select few, and she was left outside, looking in.

A university graduate in computer science, Priya embodied the report's starkest finding: jobless growth. Her formal education, the supposed golden ticket, had led to a dead end. The new jobs were for a specialised workforce speaking a language of algorithms she had to master alone. News anchors spoke of AI and automation. A UN report warned their benefits would be concentrated in the hands of a privileged few. A Morgan Stanley prediction of $3 trillion in AI investment sounded to her like a death knell for the dreams of women needing work, not abstract miracles.

She scrolled further. Extreme poverty had risen to 9.35 percent. This ghost was a truth she already knew. Her mother had toiled in the fields. Her sister, a garment worker, had lost her job to a machine. The report called it a "gender gap" and a "flawed poverty reduction model". Priya saw a system devaluing the labour of women who formed the backbone of the RMG sector while replacing them with machines. The city that once promised opportunity now felt like a cold engine, and she was a cog it no longer needed.

Priya found a desperate new purpose in the "gig economy". Experts described a digital ecosystem offering "flexible" work. It sounded like a lifeline. In a cheap internet café, she applied for data entry, transcription and coding tasks, but faced a wall of rejection. She was competing not just with a global workforce but with AI models doing the same tasks faster and cheaper. She recalled a report stating AI talent in the region was small and that women would be disproportionately affected. Her sister's factory job had been taken by a sewing automaton; now her own degree had become just as worthless, replaced by a ghost in a machine.

The stark truth was clear: "if it is not engendered, then it is endangered". The very systems promising progress were sidelining women like Priya. Reports from the World Bank and the ILO noted the potential of online gig work to offer flexibility but also documented its vulnerabilities.

Female gig workers, often doing lower-paid tasks in domestic or beauty services, faced unpredictable wages, no social security and higher rates of harassment. The automation that had displaced her sister from the factory floor now threatened Priya's efforts to find a foothold in the digital world. These findings were not just about a "gender gap". They were a warning that as Bangladesh's economy evolved, the very women who had powered its growth were being left behind, their futures imperilled by a technological shift they had no role in shaping.

Walking through the chaotic streets of Farmgate, Priya saw her failure reflected in its neon. She spotted Nabil, a former student leader who had fought against the job quota system for a merit-based future. He walked with a weary slump. "They made promises," he told her, his voice heavy with disillusion. "It was just to quiet us. No real commitment. The gap is wider than ever."

Priya realised the ghost in the machine was not only a number or a robotic arm; it was the growing distance between her and Nabil, between their shared dreams and a political reality with no room for them. She thought of a UNICEF report she had skimmed, about AI's potential to "widen existing inequalities". It was not a warning but a prophecy, and she was living it.

The writer is coordinator of Ella Alliance and founder of Ella Pad

Jamuna Bank to issue bonds to raise Tk 800cr

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Jamuna Bank has received regulatory approval to raise Tk 800 crore through the issuance of bonds under private placement.

The Bangladesh Securities and Exchange Commission, in a letter dated September 28, approved the bond, according to a disclosure posted on the Dhaka Stock Exchange (DSE) website yesterday.

The move follows an earlier announcement on April 21, 2025, when Jamuna Bank's board decided to raise capital through bond issuance to strengthen its balance sheet and support future growth.

Jamuna Bank reported a decline in net profit for the April-June quarter despite an increase in investment income.

The private commercial lender's consolidated net profit for the second quarter of 2025 fell by 8 percent year-on-year, reaching Tk 131.54 crore.

As per DSE data, as of August 31, 2025, sponsors and directors held 40.98 percent of the company's shares. The public held the largest portion with 55.43 percent, while the remaining 3.59 percent was owned by institutional and foreign investors.

Gold surges past $3,800/oz

REUTERS

Gold prices surged above $3,800 an ounce for the first time on Monday, driven by rising bets on a US Federal Reserve rate cut that weakened the dollar, while concerns over a possible US government shutdown bolstered safe-haven demand.

Spot gold jumped 1.4 percent to $3,812.49 per ounce by 0727 GMT, after hitting $3,819.59 earlier in the session. US gold futures for December delivery rose 0.9 percent to $3,842.20.

The US dollar index fell 0.2 percent, making greenback-priced bullion less expensive for overseas buyers. US President Donald Trump will meet with the top Democratic and Republican leaders in Congress later on Monday to discuss extending government funding. Without a deal, a shutdown would begin from Wednesday.

"With the Fed set to cut further rates over the next six months, I think there should be more upside for the yellow metal, targeting a level of $3,900/oz," said UBS analyst Giovanni Staunovo.

"Concern about the (US) government shutdown are also supporting demand for safe haven assets like gold," he added.

The US Personal Consumption Expenditures (PCE) Price Index on Friday matched expectations, reinforcing bets on further Fed rate cuts, with traders assigning a 90 percent chance of a 25-basis-point cut in October and a 65 percent probability for December, according to the CME FedWatch Tool.

Gold, which benefits from lower interest rates and thrives during geopolitical and economic uncertainty, has gained more than 45 percent year-to-date.

Pubali Bank to raise Tk 500cr through bonds

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Pubali Bank has received regulatory approval to raise Tk 500 crore through the issuance of its fifth subordinated bond.

In a disclosure on the Dhaka Stock Exchange (DSE) website yesterday, the bank said the Bangladesh Securities and Exchange Commission granted consent in a letter dated September 28 to issue the bond through private placement.

The approval is subject to compliance with all relevant laws and regulatory requirements.

Pubali Bank said the proceeds will be used to strengthen its capital base.

The bank had earlier announced on May 5 this year that its board had decided to raise capital through a subordinated bond.

Pubali Bank's profit surged in the April-June quarter, buoyed by higher investment income.

The bank posted a profit of Tk 393 crore in the second quarter of 2025, marking a 38 percent year-on-year growth.

As of August 31, 2025, the shareholding structure of the bank was: sponsors and directors 28.20 percent, institutional investors 28.09 percent, foreign investors 0.12 percent, and the general public 43.59 percent, as per DSE data.

China's new K visa beckons foreign tech talent as US hikes H-1B fee

REUTERS, *Beijing*

China's new visa programme aimed at attracting foreign tech talent kicks off this week, a move seen boosting Beijing's fortunes in its geopolitical rivalry with Washington as a new US visa policy prompts would-be applicants to scramble for alternatives.

While China has no shortage of skilled local engineers, the programme is part of an effort by Beijing to portray itself as a country welcoming foreign investment and talent, as rising trade tensions due to US tariffs cloud the country's economic outlook.

China has taken a series of measures to boost foreign investment and travel, opening more sectors to overseas investors and offering visa waivers for citizens from most European countries, Japan and South Korea among others.

"The symbolism is powerful: while the US raises barriers, China is lowering them," said Iowa-based immigration attorney Matt Mauntel-Medici, referring to China's new visa category, called the K visa, which launches on Wednesday.

The K visa, announced in August, targets young foreign science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) graduates and promises to allow entry, residence and employment without a job offer, which could appeal to foreign workers looking for alternatives to US job opportunities.

Earlier this month, the Trump administration said it would ask companies to pay $100,000 per year for H-1B worker visas, widely used by tech companies to hire skilled foreign workers.

An employee at a business centre in Beijing watches the Chinese national flag being raised. While China has no shortage of skilled local engineers, the programme is part of an effort by Beijing to portray itself as a country welcoming foreign investment and talent.

PHOTO: REUTERS/FILE

"The US has definitely shot itself in the foot on H-1Bs, and the timing is exquisite for China's K visa," said Michael Feller, chief strategist at Geopolitical Strategy.

Other countries including South Korea, Germany and New Zealand are also loosening visa rules to attract skilled migrants.

Immigration experts say the main attraction of the K visa is no requirement of a sponsoring employer, which has been regarded as one of the biggest hurdles for those seeking H-1B visas.

The H-1B visa requires employer sponsorship and is subject to a lottery system, with only 85,000 slots available annually. The new $100,000 fee could further deter first-time applicants.

"It's an appealing alternative for Indian STEM professionals seeking flexible, streamlined visa options," said Bikash Kali Das, an Indian student at Sichuan University.

India was by far the largest beneficiary of H-1B visas last year, accounting for 71 percent of approved beneficiaries.

Despite its promise, the K visa faces hurdles. Chinese government guidelines mention vague "age, educational background and work experience" requirements.

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