

Publication: Vulcan Post Online

Date: 04 June 2018

Headline: This SMU Grad's App Is The 'Amazon Prime For Mama Shops' - Just Raised \$450,000 Funding

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Back when I was in secondary school, I have this almost-daily routine of buying my favourite packet of chips from the mama shop downstairs to eat while watching the evening programmes on Disney Channel.



The mama shop was also the place to get my ice popsicle fix after a day of playing with my friends at the playground nearby, back when playground floors were made of sand and running up slides was so much more difficult (and potentially fatal).

It's where I would get 'emergency' groceries for my mum when she ran out of cooking oil or onions, or plasters and medicated ointment for when I got a cut or bruise while playing at the void deck.

But for a fast-paced society such as Singapore, convenience and scale are almost everything.

As air-conditioned, 24-hour convenience stores, supermarkets, and hypermarkets became increasingly common, minimarts and mama shops become more like quaint heritage icons.

So, in a bid to help these small, family-owned businesses transform in this competitive technology-driven world, Enam Chowdury created an app powered by blockchain and Artificial Intelligence (AI) that improves productivity and efficiency.

Giving Back And Going Back To His Roots

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Enam Chowdury (in yellow), Founder of EkkBaz / Image Credit: EkkBaz

Enam graduated in 2011 from Singapore Management University (SMU) majoring in Information System and Finance.

After graduation, he joined the exclusive Microsoft Consulting Service team as a Technical Consultant for a Dynamics CRM product assisting “large enterprises modernise their customer engagement through intelligent business applications”.

He then took over the technical sales side of things for the Dynamics CRM product in Singapore.

After his five-year stint at Microsoft, he started EkkBaz.

The 10th out of 12 children, Enam migrated with his parents to Singapore in 1994.

He started working at the age of 15 to help support his large family, and to pay for his education.

“This challenging upbringing made me understand the plight of the less fortunate, and motivated me to do what I can to help them,” he shared.

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Image Credit: EkkBaz

“From an early age, in school and outside, I would volunteer time with charities and was involved in multiple overseas volunteer expeditions too.”

When he was in Microsoft, he had bootstrapped ideas such as Cosified.com to encourage people to volunteer to address certain issues in societies.

Enam said his “first foray into community-based small businesses” began with his family’s own grocery store in Bukit Batok East that opened in 2013, when he was still at Microsoft.

“While helping out at the store, I experienced first-hand the challenges faced by the small business owners to operate and survive in this digital age,” he told me.

“I felt that we needed to help these businesses as I believe by empowering such community-based entrepreneurs to prosper, they create more job opportunities in the community and a much vibrant and smart economy for the country.”

He added, “This motivated me to leave Microsoft and focus full-time on EkkBaz in March 2017, where I could use my passion in technology and my experience in businesses to help these underprivileged people in whatever little ways possible.”

The One Bazaar Is All You Need

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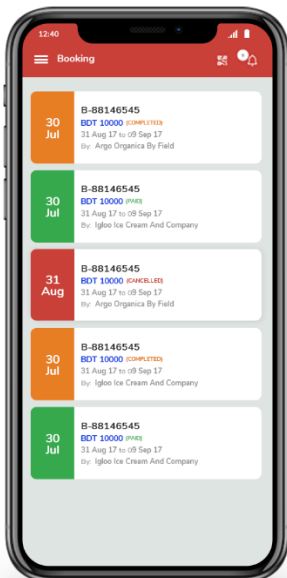


One of the grocery store owners using EkkBaz / Image Credit: EkkBaz

EkkBaz is made up of two words; 'ekk' means 'one' in Hindi, and 'baz' is short for 'bazaar'.

Their goal is to be the “one platform” for both small and large fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) businesses in the country they’re present in, and they want to “empower the small guys” with tools that are typically accessible to large enterprises.

As Enam explained to me, what EkkBaz does is it allows grocery stores to rent out shelves or open space to manufacturers or advertisers to earn extra income from shop space.



EkkBaz's 'Booking' function / Image Credit: EkkBaz

“At the same time, the app allows grocery store to order bulk products from manufacturers,” he added.

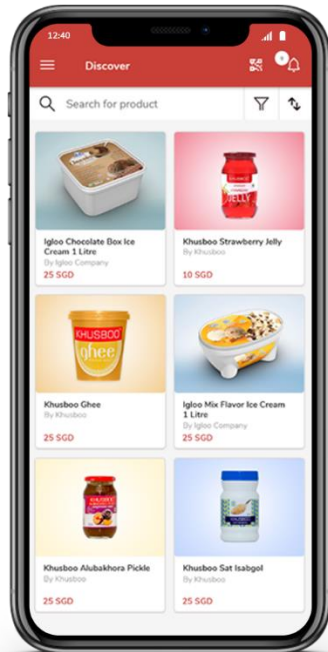
“So with the app, not only are the grocery store owners able to make extra revenue now, but also increase productivity by getting rid of all the manual and paper-intensive process involved in product ordering now.”

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The first feature that Enam described is the 'booking' function that lets store owners list their their grocery shelves and spaces, so owners can monetise their unused space or shelves from manufacturers and people looking to market their products.



EkkBaz's 'Order' function / Image Credit: EkkBaz

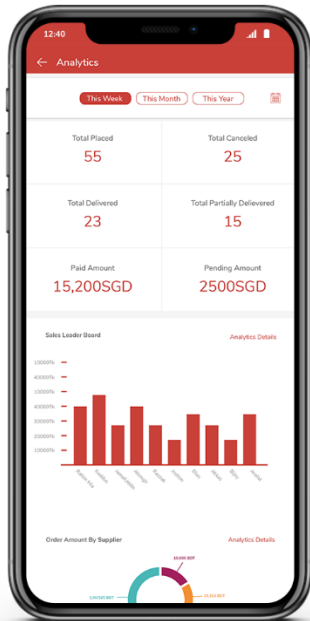
For the bulk-ordering feature, store owners would login to the app and place orders with manufacturers e-commerce style, according to Enam, which streamlines their order process and improves productivity for store owners.

Having experienced what's it like to run his own humble grocery store himself, Enam makes EkkBaz free for grocery store owners, and instead, charges manufacturers for using the platform.

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EkkBaz's 'Analytics' function / Image Credit: EkkBaz

EkkBaz has been likened to be an Amazon Prime but for small, family-run grocery stores.

They can equip these store owners with a powerful tool to have a share of the grocery industry in Asia that is estimated to grow to \$1.2 trillion by 2022, according to them.

Enam informed me that mom-and-pop shops across India are becoming the third largest force against giants like Amazon and Walmart, citing this article from the Wall Street Journal.

"e-Commerce players are entering into retail too, as seen from Amazon's purchase of Whole Foods for \$13.7 billion," he explained.

"We started way before though, and expect lots of disruption in the FMCG space as it's very outdated across various engagement channels and experiences. [At the end] of the day, consumers will choose models [they prefer]."

Being Complementary Over Being Disruptive



One of the grocery store owners using EkkBaz / Image Credit: EkkBaz

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“Based on internal data, there are more than a thousand grocery stores in Singapore excluding the convenience stores and big retail chains,” Enam stated.

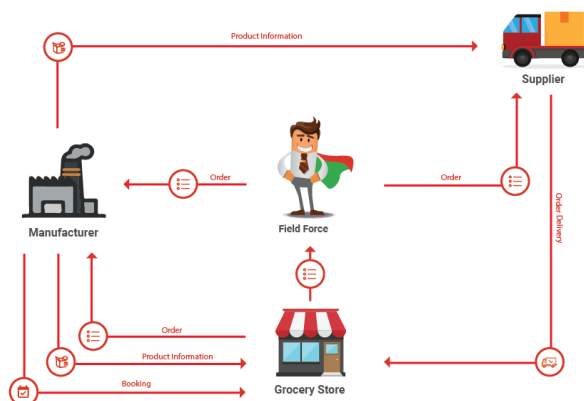
He also shared that the Straits Times reported in April that there are about 200 mama shops in Singapore.

Enam reckoned that the reason for their survival is their long-standing relations with their customers.

“Some of the grocery store owners know their patrons by name, and can recall what they order every week. They provide that convenience and experience that patrons don’t get in other commercial stores.”

He went on to say that the grocery store business “is not an easy one” because it requires a lot of persistence and experience “to survive [in] this cut-throat” industry.

“Hence the older generation can be considered (stubborn) but the newer generation are more savvy due to the rise of technology. They understand that they need to embrace easy-to-use technology to survive in this fourth industrial revolution,” he noted.



A platform overview of EkkBaz / Image Credit: EkkBaz

Enam revealed that Cheng Boon from Google and Viju Chakarapany from RedHat participated in their angel funding rounds in Singapore, and those rounds raised about \$450,000.

The founder of EkkBaz lamented that while setting up a business in Singapore is easy, the challenge is getting the right people to help reach out to potential customers.

Pitching his idea to businesses is another hurdle to cross as staff need proper training and experience in executing the sales pitch, add to that, the sales cycle can be long.

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EkkBaz at a Tech In Asia event / Image Credit: EkkBaz

He put what he learnt from Microsoft and personally trained and helped his colleagues to overcome this problem.

The 30-year-old realised the “huge difference” in the “appreciation of time” in doing business in developing and developed countries like Bangladesh and Singapore.

“In Singapore, we tend to follow time strictly for meeting or conducting any other business. Whereas in Bangladesh, time is considered expendable and meetings hardly start on time,” he said.

“I always have to be mindful of this ingrained cultural difference when I fly between Singapore and Bangladesh for business – not to be frustrated when meetings start late in Bangladesh, and to be timely in Singapore.”

He credits having had experience running his family’s grocery store and the exposure to a variety of businesses and cultures to Microsoft that has helped prepare him for the challenges he would encounter.

“We can’t change the culture but we can adopt to suit it for each country. That balanced adoption is what we try to drive given the need of the project.”

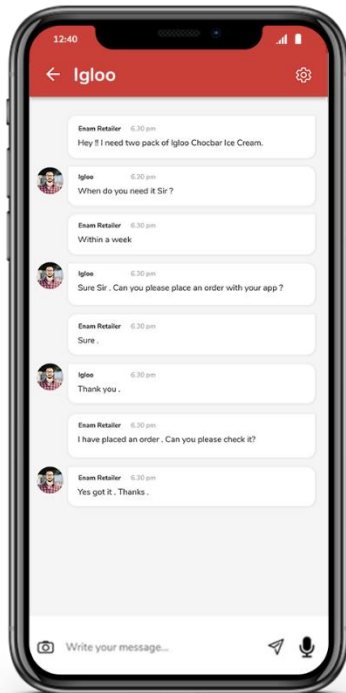
Enam said they are strong believers in the Lean Startup Methodology, so they “started involving selected customers early in the development process to shape the future of EkkBaz”.

They started beta-testing EkkBaz in Bangladesh late last year and in Singapore early this year, getting hundreds of stores in these markets to get feedback as they build and improve the platform.

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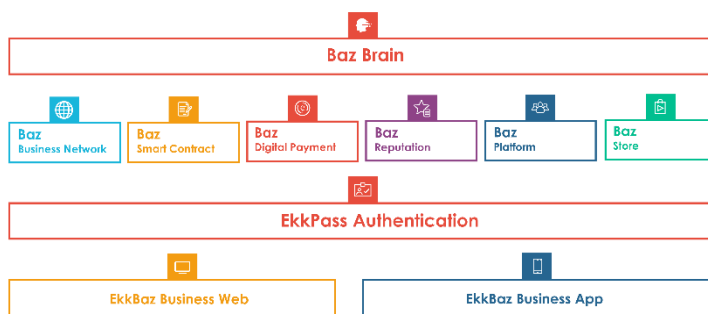
EkkBaz's 'Chat' function / Image Credit: EkkBaz

Brands like Nissin, Igloo, Haque, and more were part of the testing.

"More than 25 others brands are lined up to be onboarded once we make the app publicly available to all," he continued.

"We will be continuing the beta-testing more to stabilise the platform before making it available to all in Bangladesh and Singapore. We are also expecting to launch in India and Malaysia by end of this year."

Some of Enam's plans in the coming months for EkkBaz include conducting an ICO to raise funds and developing the BAZ Protocol.



The BAZ Protocol flow / Image Credit: EkkBaz

"[It's] a next-generation B2B collaboration for FMCG businesses as part of its EkkBaz Business mobile app," he explained.

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“Powered by blockchain, artificial intelligence, social and collaborative technologies to significantly simplify B2B interactions, this exciting new protocol will remove middlemen and empower root-level business users.”

After BAZ Protocol is ready, a 1-to-1 atomic swap for its ICO token to its internal circulation currency, EKK, will be done.

EkkBaz is currently working with grocery stores to ensure their needs are met first, and Enam revealed that retail chains and supermarkets are “keen to come onboard”.

With EkkBaz, our mama shops have an ally to count on to stay relevant in this ever-changing society.

Visit EkkBaz’s website [here](#). Follow them on Facebook [here](#) and Twitter [here](#) for updates.

Featured Image Credit: NUS FASS Blog, EkkBaz