

NOWFL^OATS™



Varanasi

Mapping an Ancient City in the Digital Age



Drive
12.0

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Digital Desh Drive 12.0

वाराणसी

Welcome to the 12th edition of the Digital Desh drive by NowFloats

As we have done over the past 9 years, our purpose is to get 'Inside the Internet of Bharat' and uncover new behaviours and trends emerging around digital adoption in Tier 3 cities and beyond. Enough has been spoken (and done) about the metros and the large cities. Our passion lies in what is Bharat - cities such as Panipat, or Pathankot. An Ajmer or Vijayawada is more important for us than Gurugram or even a Chennai or Mysore. We believe that Bharat has different behaviours, though as aspirational as India. Or even global. We like to get under the skin of these cities and individuals. We want to understand things like why do they use voice notes? Why is Amazon still a more used service than Flipkart, why broken English (or even Hinglish) is more adopted. What languages are people consuming content in? How many different languages? Via how many apps? How many are paid subscriptions? Is IPL commentary more liked in Bhojpuri?

But this time there was a catch, we were a year after a global pandemic and the related socio-economic crisis it created. The nature of the crisis was such that 'digital' became an overnight necessity for everyone, especially the millions of Micro & Small Businesses across India.

Benaras has been beckoning for a long time. One of the oldest continuously habited cities of the world. As ancient as time itself. As old economy as economy itself. As spiritual as the soul, as real as the Ganga and as dark as the funeral pyres burning, non stop, since life started.

It's a city I wanted to visit for decades and by meeting so many of its residents we not only understood their digital behaviours but, hopefully, learnt about some of our behaviors! Because Kashi makes you think. Where Rishikesh is all about Yoga, Benaras is all about Moksha. And using this metaphor, we have attempted to bring you these insights.

We hope you find that one insight or story you deeply connect to, where you believe you can contribute, participate or even lead an intervention. If you can't, don't worry, we are in constant pursuit of putting this great country in touch with itself. Join us on the drives until you find your story.

Thank You.

- Jasminder Singh Gulati
(@GulatiSingh)



Exploring the digital landscape of Varanasi: Challenges, opportunities, and the path to innovation

Varanasi is renowned for its spiritual and cultural heritage. However, the level of technology adoption in the city varies depending on an individual's exposure to technology. While some have limited access, others are highly tech-savvy with access to the latest gadgets and devices.

Mobile phones and the internet have become necessities, and digital payments are growing in popularity. Many young entrepreneurs are also looking to use technology to address local challenges and tap into new business opportunities.

Despite these positive developments, there are still challenges when it comes to adopting technology in Benaras. Unfortunately, the city has witnessed various scams, leading to a cautious mindset among its people, particularly in the digital realm. With the rise of digital interactions, individuals have become more sceptical, fearing online fraud, financial fraud, and intellectual property theft.



- Deepali
Team Digital Desh

As a result, trust issues have emerged, making locals hesitant to adopt digital services. This deep-rooted mistrust has created a significant barrier, hindering the building of trust and the growth of a robust digital ecosystem.

Nevertheless, with the right approach to digital literacy and support, the future of Banaras looks bright. The city has the potential to become a major hub of innovation in the coming years.





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Digital Dosh 12.0

Inside the internet of Bharat

Digital Dosh is a research initiative which strives to deeply understand the inside of the internet of India—to discover its changing patterns and tell the stories that truly represent the spirit of digital revolution currently sweeping Bharat.

This edition of Digital Dosh aims to chronicle how the internet is transforming one of the oldest living cities in the world—Benaras or Varanasi—and reveal the fascinating interplay between the ancient and the cutting-edge.

Digital Dosh so far:

- ✔ Drives in 10+ states
- ✔ 5 reports launched
- ✔ 7 drives organised
- ✔ Official partner, Digital India

Why was Digital Dosh conceptualised?

- ✔ To identify and document rapidly changing tech-related behaviours in Bharat.
- ✔ To understand how SMBs across verticals & locations are adapting to smartphones.
- ✔ To analyse the needs of SMBs and identify innovative use cases.
- ✔ To study digital payments including the use of UPI and mobile wallets.



FOCUS

Varanasi

Mapping an Ancient City in the Digital Age

“Banaras is older than history, older than tradition, older even than legend, and looks twice as old as all of them put together.”

Mark Twain

To survive the ages, it is imperative to adapt. Banaras, Kashi, or as it is now called—Varanasi—while proudly occupying its place as one of the oldest living cities in the world, has successfully melded modernity with tradition to forge its own path in the 21st century.

Nowhere is this transformation more evident than in the sphere of technology. The digital revolution currently sweeping India is significantly impacting the socio-economic landscape of Varanasi—whether it is the saree weavers of the city or new age tour and travel businesses. This year, Digital Desh 12.0 aims to put the digital transition of Varanasi under the lens, culminating in a massive townhall to discuss our findings at a gala event on the city's famous ghats.

बनारस
BANARAS

Insights

#1

'Swiggy and Zomato charge high commissions'

Manish Keshari and Rishabh Keshari, Rahil Restaurant (Business Category: Hospitality)

Rahil Restaurant was established in the year 2000 by Manish Keshari's father. Currently it is being managed by Manish and his son Rishabh Keshari who joined the business after completing his studies in 2018.

"In my family everybody is running a restaurant. My grandfather's first business was a restaurant but he gave it to his elder brother. He started operating a saree shop. Then after 20-25 years he started his own restaurant," says Rishabh.

Observations

The father-son duo has leveraged food delivery platforms to grow the business. They were among the first restaurants in Varanasi to adopt Zomato and Swiggy. Currently they are creating their own website to reduce their dependence on those platforms.

Reviews are the main source of customer trustability, it's the number one reason for new customers to trust you

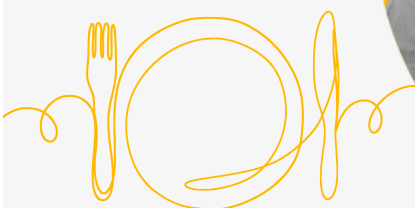
They also take advertisement costs to promote your restaurant. They will charge you 25% commission and 15% on ads. So it comes to 40-42% with taxes. I want to cut down these costs from 40% to 20% through our own online food order platform," says Rishabh.

As far as managing their restaurant is concerned, they have installed the Petpooja software which provides all types of services like billing and customer feedback. "It is specially designed for restaurants. It's an all-in-one service for us." Stock management is still manual though they are trying to automate this aspect as well.

For payments they accept Paytm, PhonePe, and other UPI apps. As far as social media is concerned, they are active on Instagram.

The father-son duo has leveraged food delivery platforms to grow. They were among the first in Varanasi to adopt Zomato and Swiggy

They also run a hotel where they rely extensively on WhatsApp to take customer bookings. "Our hotel is listed on Booking.com, Golbibo, MakeMyTrip, Agoda.com. So the main OTAs are covered and most of the bookings are generated online only," says Rishabh. Adding: "I think reviews are the main source of customer trustability, it's the number one reason for new customers to trust you. That shows your brand value."





Conclusion

The business is benefitting from the tourism influx in Varanasi and Rishabh and his father are making every effort to capitalise on the opportunity.

"You can see that our prime minister Mr Narendra Modi is promoting the Kashi Vishwanath corridor. The biggest reason for creating that corridor are the tourists, because Kashi Vishwanath is the heart of Varanasi. And that is great for us as we are located on the way to the Kashi Vishwanath Temple. Here season and off-season are the same. Every month is tourist season for hoteliers," says Rishabh.



#2

'Saw a major jump in our business during Covid'

Shruti Shah, Sacred Weaves (Business Category: Online Saree Retailing)

Shruti Shah started Sacred Weaves (www.sacredweaves.com), an online store for Banarasi sarees, five years ago. Back then, the concept of selling Banarasi sarees online hadn't gained traction. They were among the first Banarasi saree retailers to go online and proved to be something of a trendsetter in this regard.

The Banarasi saree business isn't new to Shruti and her family. The family has been running a saree manufacturing unit for the past 130 years. Sacred Weaves is the retail arm of Jagdish Das Shah & Company—popularly known as JDS—and follows a 100% online business model. Currently their customers come from the US, Australia, Dubai and Singapore apart from India.

Observations

The biggest challenge that Shruti faced at the onset was to find the right kind of professional talent. Being a digital business, they needed skilled developers, designers, and digital marketers who could create engaging content and ensure it was seen by the right kind of people.

"We solved the problem by training the employees ourselves," says Shruti. Today, her setup consists of 25 employees including people from the technical department, dispatch department, digital marketing department, fashion advisors and the photoshoot department.

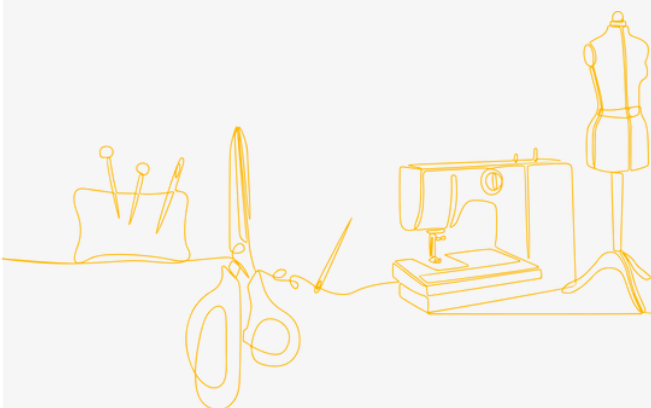
Their SEO-optimised website is built on the Shopify platform and enjoys a good rank for related keywords. Besides this they are highly active on Facebook and Instagram.

Their large digital advertising budget of Rs 8-10 lakh monthly has generated excellent ROI in the form of followers which are currently at 2.5 lakh for Facebook and 81,000 for Instagram. They are also present on Google My Business (GMB) and Pinterest but less active on the latter.

Apart from this, they also engage with their old customers through emails and WhatsApp. "We reach out to any customer who hasn't purchased anything from us in six months."

While most businesses struggled due to Covid, the pandemic proved to be a period of high growth for this company.

"We saw a major jump in our business during Covid. The entire city was shut, all the businesses were closed, but we were working 24x7."



She attributes this to the fact that online shopping became a way of life for people during this phase. "Before the pandemic, people hesitated to buy luxury goods online, but the pandemic changed that. People became comfortable buying everything—from low-cost items to high-value luxury goods—through e-commerce."

The system of fashion advisors that she has instituted has been critical to their success. Four fashion advisors have been trained to attend customer calls from all across the world and act as their representatives in the store. "Their brief is to give the customer the true picture of the product so that there is no difference between what they are being told and what they finally receive."

All major online payment modes are accepted including credit cards, debit cards, Apple Pay and PayPal for overseas customers. Other apps used by the business mostly relate to digital marketing analytics and performance optimisation like Ads Manager and HashTag Expert.



Conclusion

As an online business, one of the biggest challenges is to create customer trust. This is achieved through a variety of ways including customer testimonials on their website and GMB. "There are a lot of genuine websites that sell Banarasi sarees, but there are also fake ones. Maybe the government should provide some sort of accreditation for genuine online retailers so that customers find it easier to trust us," she says.

Having achieved good scale and success in her online business, her next plan is to set up pop-up stores in each of her major markets for a few days each year so that her customers can experience her products physically and relate better with them.

#3

'God's Grace + Digital'

Rakesh Singh, Kids Gurukul (Business Category: Education)

Rakesh Singh is a qualified fashion designer who has worked with icons like Ritu Beri back in the 1990s before coming back to Varanasi to look after his ageing parents. His foray into the education sector happened quite by accident when he started teaching fashion designing at the Government Girls Polytechnic on an ad hoc basis following his return to the city.

"At 25, I was only a few years older to the students I was teaching, and yet I was receiving incredible respect. It led me to think, if this is the kind of esteem I could receive as an ad hoc lecturer, imagine what could happen if I took up the profession full time." That seed of thought took the shape of Kids Gurukul, a school that started with five students that has matured to a full-fledged institution with 600 students studying between Nursery and Class VIII.

Observations

Ironically, Rakesh tends to avoid the word "school" in all his communications, seeing it as a symbol of commercialisation. Catering to children from lower middle class families and below, commerce has never been a priority for the institution.

"There has been no fee increment for the past six years," says Rakesh, giving us an insight into how he works. He has also never charged late fees from any parent despite delays. "And yet, I have given 40% hikes to my staff in the current academic session." How does he manage it? "It is all God's grace," he says.

"The impact of visual presentation in education is very powerful," says Rakesh



Scan this for a detailed virtual tour of the school

Covid proved to be a challenging time for Rakesh personally who had to be airlifted to Jaipur for treatment. As far as the school was concerned, its student strength dropped from 600 to 100 even as online classes were initiated. Currently, digital technology has been incorporated in a variety of ways to augment classroom teaching and aid in the holistic development of the students. This includes a tie-up with LEAD for edtech solutions including digital classrooms as well as the use of customised software for managing student profiles and performance tracking.

Another impact of Covid was the digitisation of payments including the growing use of online modes to pay school fees.

Digital technology has been incorporated in a variety of ways to augment classroom teaching and aid in the holistic development of students



There is an active Facebook page and YouTube channel where various activities of the school are highlighted. These accounts are managed by Rakesh's son. Apart from this, the school is using WhatsApp to update parents about the homework of their wards—something it used to do through bulk SMSs in the pre-WhatsApp era. There is a modern website which offers a detailed virtual tour of the school. Rakesh has not felt the need for using digital platforms for hiring because of the limited churn rate among the staff.

Conclusion

Despite their limited access to resources, Kids Gurukul has managed to incorporate digitisation in multiple aspects of their school operations. The pace of digital change is led by Rakesh himself who spends a considerable amount of time conceiving new ways of engaging students through digital platforms.

This emphasis on digital education, coupled with the humane approach of the management, and the dedication of the staff, has led to a high retention rate among students and is responsible for the continuing survival of the institution over nearly two decades.



#4

'We have our own app'

Dhairya Singh, Holy Children's Public School & Hostel (Business Category: Education)

Holy Children's Public School & Hostel traces its origins to 2001 when it began as a humble two-room institution teaching a handful of students. From there it has grown into a full-fledged English medium co-ed CBSE school with four sister institutions catering to students in various stages of their academic journey—from school to college.

"We worked hard on the business and today we have managed to establish four institutions across the city," says Dhairya Singh, director of the organisation. Currently the school teaches students up to Class 12 and has 130 employees on its rolls.

Observations

The school ran losses for two years due to the pandemic but is gradually returning to its normal student count. All operations including billing and inventory are fully digitised with the help of a Mumbai-based software company.

As far as online visibility is concerned, the school has an active presence on all major platforms including Google My Business, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, Justdial and Yellow Pages. Their social media updates are outsourced to an external agency which shares regular posts on their behalf. They also have a detailed website and their Facebook page is optimised with Linktree links to relevant website and social media pages.

Apart from this, the school has an app where parents and guardians can register themselves. It provides all the information they need about their wards including details of their classwork, homework, report card, PTMs, and a fee payment facility. As far as hiring is concerned, vacancies are advertised in local newspapers and also on their social media channels. Dhairya, who is fully aware of the power of social media in today's world, is firmly convinced that "nothing is better than social media these days" to get the word out.

In fact, he was one of the early social media users when he started using it for the school in 2009. "Back then, there was Orkut and Facebook. People would question me about why I was using social media to promote my school. But as you can see, social media has taken over the world nowadays.

"Reels ka zamana hai, 30 second mein sab kuch dikhana hai," quips the tech-savvy Dhairya

The tech-savvy Dhairya has a number of apps on his personal smartphone including multiple bank apps, an LIC app, BookMyShow, the video, chat and voice call app Botim to keep in touch with old friends, Strava—a social network for athletes, Hotstar, Netflix, MakeMyTrip, Voot, and a Spotify subscription account. He is not into online shopping.





Conclusion

Holy Children's Public School & Hostel is a good example of how educational institutions are leveraging technology to streamline their operations and keep parents informed about the performance of their wards. On his part, Dhairya keeps himself abreast of all the latest developments in technology both through his own initiative and through various formal and informal networking channels. He firmly believes in the value of digital technology and says that people who lag behind in terms of technology will be left behind in today's world.



#5

'Return to sender'

Dr Vishal Singh, Vinod Diagnostic Center (Business Category: Medical Diagnostics)

After working for a decade in well-known hospitals like Medanta and Fortis Memorial Research Institute in Gurugram, and Nanavati Hospital in Mumbai, Dr Vishal Singh returned to the city of his birth—Varanasi—to set up his own diagnostic centre. The new building was constructed in record time so that the business could be launched without delay.

Currently Vinod Diagnostic Centre is an up-and-coming medical diagnostic centre in the city with a variety of services including MRI, CT scan, ultrasound, digital X-ray, blood tests, home collection and ambulance service.

Observations

As the business is still being established, it does not have a strong online presence. There is an active website which has been created but lead generation is poor. Its presence on Instagram is negligible but it is relatively active on Facebook.

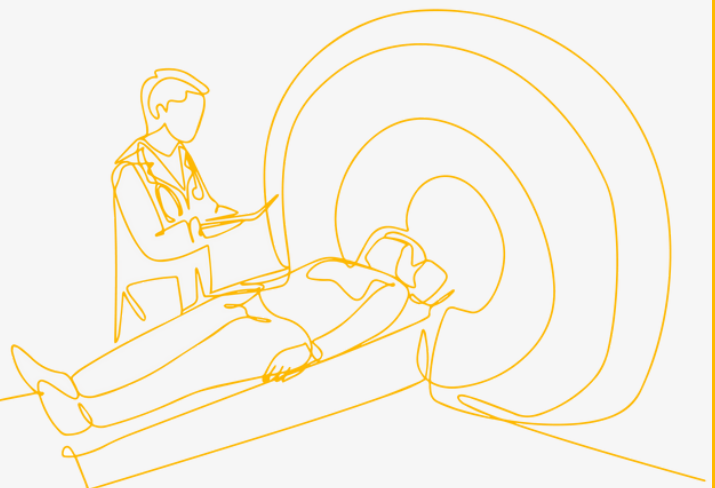
The centre is not listed on Practo or Justdial because Dr Vishal is not convinced about its utility. "Just the other day, someone called me from Justdial but I am not interested," he says. The reason why marketing has been deprioritised at the moment is because the diagnostics business is largely reference-driven. However, Dr Vishal is not closed to marketing the centre in future.

As far as payments are concerned, it is mostly cash and online.

Billing is performed through a locally-developed software called Gravity. "As far as possible, I promote local businesses. I only opt for branded products if I have had a bad experience with the local contractor," says Dr Vishal.

But the biggest impact of digitisation can be observed on the core business itself. Apart from acquiring advanced CT scan and MRI machines, the centre uses a PACS software (Picture Archiving and Communication System) to centralise all patient reports and share them with stakeholders as necessary.

"In case there is an issue, I can see the report from anywhere on my phone—whether I am sitting here in the premises or discussing something in a hotel," says Dr Vishal. "These days, teleradiology is being used by most of the centres in the periphery." Apart from this Dr Vishal also has also installed some free apps on his phone to help him with his diagnosis if required.



Conclusion

Having worked in the best hospitals in the country, Dr Vishal is trying to implement some of those practices in his own diagnostics centre. "All the modalities in my centre are interconnected," he says. "I do all my reporting from one room only. Only if there is an emergency do I move to the console." Having launched the business recently, Dr Vishal is getting ready to make a mark for himself in the coming years.



#6

'The future is not today'

Chandrakant Singh, Hare Rama Hare Krishna (Business Category: Metal Gate Manufacturer; Aluminium & Plywood Wholesaler)

Chandrakant Singh started his business with a seed capital of Rs 17,000 and one small shop. Today he is the owner of two shops and one workshop where 12 people are employed on a permanent basis. His business includes manufacturing steel and aluminium gates for B2B clients in addition to a wholesale plywood and aluminium business.

"We cater to 28 shops in the city by taking up their work and dropping the finished product at their premises, to enable them to further sell to their customers," says Chandrakant.

Observations

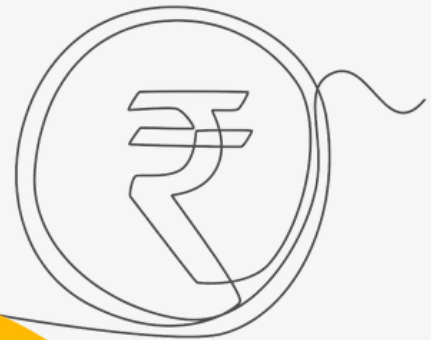
Chandrakant's business was able to weather the impact of Covid better than others. He attributes this to the fact that he follows a relationship-based business model as opposed to a transactional one. "Whatever business we get is based on relationships. We make sure we supply quality products to our customers. Hence our sales have always been good," he says.

Chandrakant has introduced digitisation in a few areas of his business including transactions. "Most of our transactions are carried out in cash but we are open to accepting cheques and online payments. It mostly depends on the sale value. If the amount is small, we prefer cash. But if the amount is big then our customers can pay using any method they wish."

He adds: "I believe that in the future online business will become important. Using online payments, one can pay both big and small amounts. Previously, people used to pay bigger amounts in cheques which used to take up to three days to process. Also, people could not be sure if the cheque would be honored. Now with online modes the money is received instantly. You can verify the payment on your phone and there are speakers to announce it as well."

Besides payments, customer communication is another area where digitisation has helped. "WhatsApp is extremely useful for us. It is the best way to share images with our customers. We send photos of the proposed design and if they are satisfied, we start the work," he says.

Among online listings, Chandrakant's business is only present on IndiaMart. It accounts for a small part of his sales due to his business model. Ninety-five per cent of his customers approach him due to personal relationships. They get only around 10-20 customers annually through IndiaMart. These are mostly non-local customers or those who have newly arrived in the city.





Conclusion

Chadrakant is aware of the many opportunities that digitisation brings to help him grow his business. "If I embrace the internet, maybe my income will increase from lakhs today, to crores tomorrow. There are many businesses that have gone global with the help of the internet. I would want the same to happen to me as well."

Chandrakant has been thinking of getting a website for the past three months. He is willing to spend Rs 10,000-15,000 to begin with which could be increased depending on the results

From starting with digital payments and WhatsApp to envisioning a digital future for his business, Chandrakant Singh epitomises the vision and hard work of small business owners in India.



#7

'I will computerise the business gradually'

Juganu Kumar Agrahari, Maa Laxmi Saree Centre (Business Category: Saree Retailing)

Juganu Kumar Agrahari hopes that this time he'll be lucky. His new business—Maa Laxmi Saree Centre—was launched recently in January 2023. The businesses he ran earlier—a gift items business, a grooming products business, a menswear business, and a medical clinic—had all taken off but came to an abrupt end due to circumstances like family illness and Covid. Aware that he is getting on in years—and hence running out of time—Juganu is putting all his effort into making the saree business successful.

"My shop is called Maa Laxmi Saree Centre. Laxmi was my mother's name. So it is a reference to the goddess as well as my mother," Juganu says. "I started the business with just two employees. We got many customers from the hotel behind us. The area where the shop is located is actually a tourist hub. There are three types of businesses that do well in Varanasi—restaurants, lodging and saree."

Observations

While Juganu is a seasoned businessman, he is new to the saree business. Most of his time is spent learning about the trade and trying to establish his new enterprise. Hence he has not been able to devote time to digitising the business.

Juganu has already experienced the benefits of digital marketing when it helped him get leads for his medical clinic. "I received a very good response from there. But currently I find it difficult to take out time for digital marketing. What I have done with the clinic, I have not been able to do here as I haven't found the time for it till now," he says.

At present digitisation is limited to the collection of online payments through Google Pay and PhonePe.

Juganu says he experimented with online marketplaces like Amazon and Flipkart in the past but noticed several drawbacks. "If the customer does not like the product they will return it. But when we receive it, it is not the same product"

For example, if I send a saree, I will get back a pair of pants. What will I do with it? Maybe I will try these platforms once again later. It has been just one-and-a-half months since I opened the business. I have other priorities right now."





Conclusion

Personally he owns two Samsung smartphones with common apps like WhatsApp, Facebook and YouTube. WhatsApp is useful for sharing product photos with customers.

Any further digitisation, however, will have to wait. "I will computerise the business gradually. Right now everything is manual. First I need to understand the saree trade and establish the business well. Then I will proceed towards digitisation."



#8

'The Golden Triangle for Indian tourists is Varanasi, Prayagraj and Ayodhya'

Anil Gupta and Ashutosh Gupta, Maharani Art Palace (Business Category: Art Shop)

Brothers Anil and Ashutosh Gupta run a sleek, clean and brightly-lit art shop in the Chaukaghat area of Varanasi. They are the fourth generation in the family business and their shop is still at the same location where their great-grandfather first started.

They source their items from across the country with a focus on artefacts that depict Varanasi and Sarnath. The business depends solely on tourists, who are visiting the city in droves. The renewed gush of visitors after the hiatus of Covid is greatly helping the business.

Observations

While the brothers were firmly plugged into the digital world, Covid badly hit their endeavours.

They are present on Google My Business (GMB), Justdial, Trade India, Exporters India, Facebook and Instagram. However, **their website is now defunct while their presence on social media is dwindling.** The aspiration to go online is there but the resources are inadequate.

Prior to the pandemic, with several foreigners visiting Varanasi, **their customers often asked them to export items abroad—chiefly to the US and Japan.** This led to the adoption of online payments. Though Covid impacted their business in a massive way, it pushed them to accept digital payments on a daily basis. These days, many Indian customers use UPI for payment. Although most of the customers still **pay in cash**, the brothers enjoy the convenience that UPI brings to the business

Conclusion

The cleanup of the city has led to the advent of an increasing number of tourists. Customers, who are more tech-savvy than before, have forced them to embrace digital technology. What's interesting is that technology adoption has enabled them to grow the number of Indian customers rather than foreigners. "The Golden Triangle for Indian tourists could be Varanasi, Prayagraj and Ayodhya. We need to prepare ourselves for that."



#9

'Maybe I will start advertising when I create my own brand'

Aman Jaiswal, Balaji Traders (Business Category: Sewing Machine Wholesaler)

Aman Jaiswal started out as a wholesaler of domestic sewing machines five years ago. Today most of his customers are from smaller towns and cities in eastern UP including Ramnagar and Mirzapur. "Most of my customers are in the 250 km radius from Varanasi. Our goods come from Punjab. We are simply traders," explains Aman.

Aman observed an opportunity for a sewing machine wholesale business when he saw good demand for the product coupled with a lack of wholesalers. Today he has 150 counters spread across the eastern UP region from where his customers can place their orders.

Observations

Most of the customers of Balaji Traders are from the rural areas, leading Aman to focus more on B2B doorstep marketing to gain new customers and grow the business. Hence his business is not listed on any online platform except Justdial to which he had subscribed a couple of years ago, but did not renew since. "Only 25% of my customers are from cities, the rest are all rural. Who uses Justdial or IndiaMART there?" Aman asks.



Most of the customers are from the rural areas, leading Aman to focus more on B2B doorstep marketing to gain new customers and grow the business

The fact that Aman extends credit to his customers also helps.

Business is growing at a rate of 10-15% per year. Why should I try anything different?

As far as digital technology goes, he is heavily reliant on his personal WhatsApp account for customer communication. This includes sharing images of bills, receipts and purchase orders for the smooth flow of business.

When it comes to transactions, 60% of his payments are in cash and the rest are online. He uses IMPS, RTGS and NEFT and does not accept UPI as his ticket sizes are generally high.

Conclusion

While the current business model does not lend itself to marketing, Aman is open to it in future. "This is not my own brand, you could say that I have taken an agency or a dealership. And since my customers are rural-based, advertising does not make much sense for me. Maybe I will start advertising when I create my own brand some day." he says.

#10

'If we don't go digital, it will be difficult for us in future'

Ramanand Tiwari, Pilgrims Book House (Business Category: Bookstore)

The history of Pilgrims Book House goes back 45 years when Ramanand Tiwari established a small bookshop in Varanasi. Later he shifted to Pokhara in Nepal and later to Kathmandu taking the bookshop with him.

"In Kathmandu we ran a bookshop for 30 years which caught fire. It was many times larger than this one. I lost everything—the books, art objects, first editions, signed copies by Gandhiji, even Einstein. The bookstore used to be a landmark. People like Edmund Hillary, Reinhold Messner, Gulzar, Vajpayee, Jimmy Carter—had all visited the bookstore," says Ramanand.

Along with the bookstore he ran a publishing house which shut down before Covid due to some problems.

Observations

Covid was a difficult time for the business with a lot of overheads and limited sales

There were some sales online but it was a minuscule percentage as the online business was quite small. Survival required the disposal of some assets including a piece of land in Delhi but ultimately they were able to keep their doors open.

Currently their books are available on e-commerce platforms like Amazon and Flipkart. They also run a website with e-commerce facility. Apart from this they are available on social media including Facebook and Instagram although they are not very active on those platforms (their Nepal branch, which still exists, is much more active online).

Currently Ramanand is looking for ways to raise his digital game by hiring tech-savvy marketers.

The history of Pilgrims Book House goes back 45 years when Ramanand established a small bookshop in Varanasi. Later he shifted to Pokhara

Though he owns a smartphone, he uses a limited number of apps including WhatsApp, Twitter and Facebook. "I was also using the Kumbh app, it was very helpful." As far as payments go, most customers pay by card. They have also started accepting UPI payments. "Almost 90% of our business transactions take place through cheques, cards, UPI, RTGS etc." While hiring is done through online ads, posters, and referrals.





Conclusion

Ramanand plans to invest in digital marketing soon to make his business more competitive. "I need a team of young people for that. We have to get there soon. I have been trying as well. I need people who have interest and can manage this kind of thing. Because it is very difficult to find such people in Banares. Maybe it is a lack of my searching" he says.



#11

'I use Drapezy to click images of my sarees and auto-drape them on models'

Muhammad Zaid Ansari, Samad Textiles (Business Category: Textile Wholesalers)

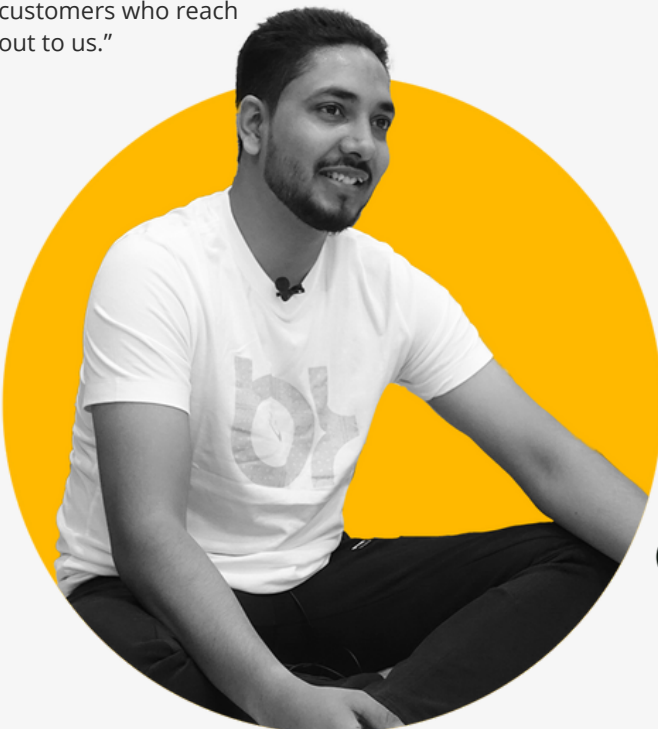
Muhammad Zaid Ansari joined the family business two years ago after his graduation from Delhi University. "My grandparents were weavers, and this business has progressed over the years. We sell sarees and dress material. We export this material and also do retail," he says.

During Covid the offline market had barely any sales while the online marketing was booming. Zaid started posting some images of their products on Instagram and received excellent responses from people.

Digitisation has helped people with less capital grow their businesses online

Observations

Apart from Instagram and Facebook, they have posted their products on Amazon, Meesho, Flipkart, and IndiaMART. "We spend about two hours per day posting pictures of our products and try to be a little creative. We list some of our best products that are reasonably priced, and we get a lot of responses from our customers who reach out to us."



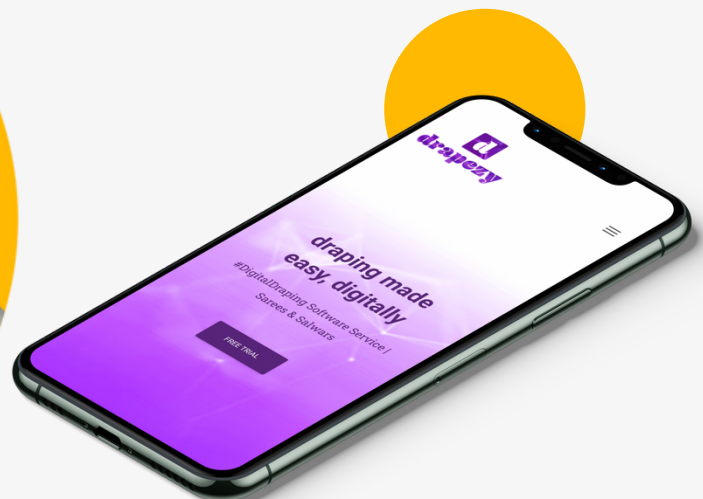
Currently their Instagram activity has taken a backseat because they are unable to manage the time. When it comes to online marketplaces they had a problem with COD which was not convenient for them and the returns policy was also problematic.

They are listed on Google My Business and are receiving many leads from there. "I generally analyse the data from Google and try to see how many customers have visited me through search."

During Covid, Zaid started posting some product images on Instagram and received good response

"BNI provides a platform for a wholesale business like mine, but they charge a lot. If it is cheaper or available for free, like Facebook or Instagram, many businessmen would move off to such platforms," says Zaid.

He uses WhatsApp Business to keep in touch with his customers and vendors. "I spent at least two to three hours on Whatsapp Business. This allows me to do trading outside the city and in a much more convenient manner. All you need to do is send images of your products and get business through it."



He is using an app called **Drapezy** to generate images of models draped in sarees. "I have recently discovered an app called Drapezy, it allows me to click images of a saree and drape the saree onto a model. I was earlier quite anxious that the app would not do justice to the product. However, on using it I realised that it works very well. At Rs 40-50 per product the charges are also affordable."

Conclusion

Payments are done through cash, cheque and online while their accounts are kept on Tally. Zaid is among the handful of wholesalers in Varanasi who is leveraging multiple aspects of digital media to craft a success story for himself.



#12

'The internet made me who I am'

Adya Lakhmani, Cake & Cookies (Business Category: Bakery)

Twenty-three-year-old Adya Lakhmani runs Cake & Cookies with her father in the prime location of Bhelupur. Adya is the fourth generation in the business who has now taken on the mantle of pâtissier under the guidance of her father who started the shop 16 years ago.

The business is governed by two aspects: taste and pricing. In the pre-Covid days, people were willing to spend more but these days it has become a price-sensitive market. The father-daughter duo are always thinking of innovative ways to meet these new challenges.

Observations

The marketing strategy of Cake & Cookies is primarily technology driven although they only engage with a handful of platforms.

Adya was active on Instagram for some years when her internet-savvy younger brother assisted her with posting. As he moved on for further studies her primary platform of communication became WhatsApp—especially its status updates. It mainly enables her to reach out to her existing customers where the response has been encouraging. Apart from this they are also on Google My Business (GMB), Justdial, Zomato, Facebook and a few other local listings.

Another reason for leaving Instagram was a sour experience when Adya—passionate about introducing original designs on her shelves—**saw her designs being copied by a competitor who turned around and accused her of stealing their designs instead.**

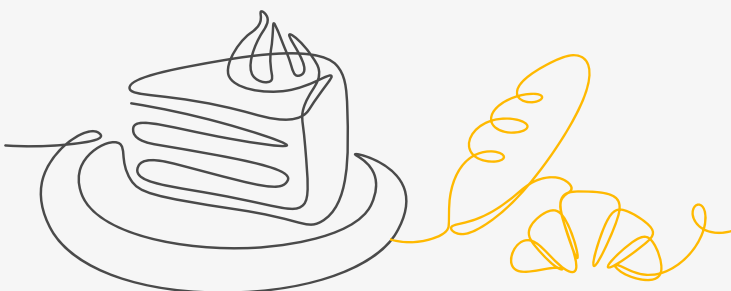


Conclusion

Apart from promoting her business, Adya relies heavily on the internet to refine her skills and learn. Her primary references include YouTube and Instagram. This enables her to be more innovative.

The marketing strategy of Cake & Cookies is primarily technology driven although they only engage with a handful of platforms

In hindsight, Adya feels that she should have remained active on Instagram despite the bad experience she underwent. She intends to return someday though her focus remains creating new designs and promoting her business through WhatsApp.



#13

'90% of my payments came through UPI in March'

Dr Sayeda Manar, Dental Health Care (Business Category: Dental Clinic)

Dr Sayeda Manar arrived in Varanasi following her marriage a few years ago. Subsequently she worked at a private clinic with senior doctors. She ventured out on her own in 2021 even amid Covid because, she says, "I realised that the virus will not go away, we have to learn to live with it." Today, Dental Health Care is establishing itself as a reputable clinic in the area and clocks 4-5 patients a day.

Observations

With her husband being a digital marketer, Sayeda has managed to create a strong online presence which is helping her business immensely. Her business website contains all the necessary information including contact details, business hours, doctor profile, patient testimonials and detailed service listings.

Apart from her website her business is also active on Instagram, Facebook and Google My Business (GMB). All of these accounts are managed by her husband's digital marketing agency. "I just share the content with them and they post it on different channels," says Dr Sayeda

She uploads flyers on her WhatsApp status and has successfully got leads from there. Some leads also come from her BNI network. Offline marketing channels include wall painting advertising, calendars and posters.

Although Dr Sayeda is aware of platforms like Practo where doctors get listed online, she has not registered on these yet

All her payments are received in the form of cash or UPI . Cards are not accepted as she does not have a swipe machine. "The proportion of online payments and cash may vary from month to month. For example, in March, 90% of my payments came through UPI."

"After Covid, people have reduced their dependence on cash. I too don't carry any cash. I have my wallet in the form of my mobile," she says. There is no billing or accounting software yet as the business is still in its early stages and transactions are also low.

Conclusion

Sayeda's active presence on the internet has fast-tracked her business growth and enabled her to see the value in digital marketing. As her business expands, she will adopt more advanced solutions that can spread awareness about her practice and streamline her operations.



90%

#14

'My plan is to create a fully paperless business'

Adnan Khan, United Pest Control (Business Category: Pest Control Services)

United Pest Control was established in 1984 as the first professional pest control agency in Varanasi. "Pests used to be a big problem in those days and people used to rely on home remedies to control them. My father was the first one to start a professional pest control service and provide a proper solution to the problem," says Adnan Khan, the current owner.

These days his customers include multiple segments like commercial (warehouses, hotels and food manufacturing units), residential, and government organisations like GAIL.

Observations

United Pest Control is one those rare companies that did alright during the pandemic because they also provided disinfection services. "During Covid, only two businesses did well—FMCG, and disinfection. We trained our staff to carry out disinfection services in line with Covid protocols. At one point we were disinfecting 30-40 houses a day."

United Pest Control is one those rare companies that did alright during the pandemic because they also provided disinfection services.

Currently, a bulk of his operations are carried out digitally with the help of a customised software created especially for the business. It contains all the information he needs including servicing dates, payment details, warranty period, billing, amount of chemicals consumed daily, and so on. As far as payments are concerned, commercial customers usually prefer NEFT and cheque while residential customers prefer UPI and cash.

"My plan is to create a fully paperless business," says Adnan. To that end, the next step is to digitise the work order process including the purchase of 4-5 iPads and suitable software to upgrade the entire process.

Currently his business is listed on platforms like Google and Justdial but the number of conversions are negligible. "I had a Justdial subscription but did not get much business from there. Hence I did not renew the plan." The bulk of his business comes from digital flyers shared on WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram as well as the BNI app.



He works with an agency to create these flyers and uploads them himself on his Facebook and Instagram pages. As far as BNI is concerned, Adnan believes it is working well for him. "My business model is such that it is able to benefit greatly from BNI."

Conclusion

Currently the business is facing competition from new entrants many of whom are not trained in proper pest control techniques. "These new entrants are charging less but they also do a poor quality job. The reputation of the entire pest control industry is getting ruined as a result," says Adnan.

He says he caters to select customers who understand the value of doing a good pest control job. "Our quality is good and therefore our charges are also higher. There are many advantages to working with us including a warranty period." The 40-year legacy also helps in gaining new customers and retaining old ones.



#15

'I use a Nothing phone but my digital transactions are zero'

Saurabh Sonkar, Farmer

Saurabh Sonkar has walked alone within his own big family to become an organic farmer. Although people tried to dissuade him from taking up agriculture, he was determined to pursue his goal. Despite the difficulties he has faced along the way he continues on his mission.

A BHU alumnus in his early 30s, he is not only passionate about chemical-free farming but is also a vegan activist. Saurabh farms on a small patch of land within the BHU campus which is leased by the university each year. He visits government facilities regularly to keep himself abreast of the latest organic farming techniques.

Observations

Saurabh is a fairly tech-savvy individual who has been using various applications for years. He believes in the power of technology as a window to the world and affirms its ability to make his life easier. However, his view on digital usage within the farming community is grim.

For example, when it comes to payments, everything in the farming world is cash-driven. From buying seeds to selling one's harvest to paying labourers—**cash is the norm and there is no room for digital transactions**

At the same time, most of the farmers don't own land and therefore they do not have access to subsidies. It's a world that leans towards the rich.

"I am a reasonably tech-savvy person, who has had a smartphone for years and who uses UPI a lot. But in my own farming life, be it procurement, or selling, or paying my labourers, my digital transactions over the years have been zero," Saurabh says.

Although there are government initiatives like promoting online content for farmers, the reality on the ground is different.

There is no time or the resources for farmers to view this content. When getting through life itself is challenging, technology adoption isn't a priority.

He considers himself one of the lucky ones who is able to follow experts on YouTube and Facebook, watch their videos, and learn about new perspectives in the organic realm. "I learnt a good deal about kechua khad [vermicompost] through YouTube, which I have used on my land and want to teach others as well."



To the outside world, farming may appear lucrative or exotic but the reality is different. Things are biased towards farmers with resources. To avail government subsidies, farmers are required to have their own land or produce a formal rent agreement. "But villagers refuse to give you a rent agreement because they believe they will get embroiled in legal issues." On the other hand, even if someone owns a piece of land or produces a valid rent agreement, lack of easy access to a water supply leads to its own set of problems.



Conclusion

Saurabh believes that given the practical, hands-on nature of farming, digitisation has limited use. But he also admits that the digital world will continue to add value especially with regard to exchange of information. It can also be valuable connecting farmers with like-minded people so that they can benefit from each other's experience and prosper. "Access to the internet is important as it's a very effective medium to learn new things from," he says.

#16

'GMB enabled me to promote my business for free'

Siddharth Pahuja, Alka Distributors (Business Category: Battery Dealership)

Siddharth Pahuja of Alka Distributors comes with a background in media, having learnt animation and graphic design after his graduation. Thereafter, he joined Red FM in Varanasi as a sound engineer. After two years at Red FM, he entered the battery business. "It was a difficult decision to resign from my job at Red FM. But I took the plunge and started the business. I wanted to enter a business where people used the things I sold on a day-to-day basis. Battery is something that is used in cameras, microphones, cars and trucks, so I felt that there is a bright future for this business," he says.

Today he runs a thriving business where he stocks all types of batteries including car, truck, tractor, generator, bulldozer, bike, e-rickshaw, computer UPS and industrial batteries for solar power.

Observations

Given his background in media and technology, Siddharth found it relatively easy to use digital channels to promote his business and simplify his operations. For example, a large part of his payments are digital—from 20-30% in the pre-Covid era to 80% currently. He is also using billing software like Tally and Sleek Bill (the free version) to manage billing and payments.

But the biggest benefit comes from Google My Business (GMB) where his business leads the rankings. "After the first wave of Covid, we updated our details on Google. If you key in 'Varanasi battery dealers' on Google, my ranking is on top with 88-plus genuine reviews. That became a huge advantage for me. Thus, I was able to promote my business on GMB for free—something that others spend money on," says Siddharth. Today he enjoys a rich flow of customers who are constantly contacting him after learning about his business from Google.

“While the free listing worked well, paid ones on GMB did not”

When he started placing ads on GMB to grow the business further, his enquiries started falling. This is likely because customers tend to trust organic rankings more than paid ones. Earlier he also maintained a website for a few years called Electrobaba.com but failed to get leads. Currently his business is active on Instagram and Facebook where he regularly posts videos.

"If you key in 'Varanasi battery dealers' on Google, my ranking is on top with 88-plus genuine reviews... Thus, I was able to promote my business on GMB for free," says Siddharth

Siddharth is a heavy user of WhatsApp and uses it to communicate with his customers and share quotations.



Siddharth also uses BNI Connect, the online social media platform and mobile application used by thousands of BNI (Business Network International) members in India to connect with others and refer business to each other.

As a support ambassador for BNI in his area, Siddharth is responsible for mentoring other BNI members and familiarising them with the app. The BNI Connect app is one of the tools he uses to grow his business. In the past one-and-a-half years he has met 480 members, given 354 referrals and received 259 referrals from BNI. "I have given business worth Rs 18,30,000 and received business worth Rs 29,63,000 with the help of BNI," says Siddharth.



Conclusion

Despite having no background in the battery business, Siddharth has managed to make a success of it. Today, he is one of the leading battery distributors in the city with both retail as well as corporate/industrial customers. In the 20 years that he has been a businessman, Siddharth has leveraged technology, hard work and ingenuity to reach where he is today.

#17

'I am waiting...'

Amar Dubey, Katha Films (Business Category: Film Production)

With an interest in theatre, Amar Dubey wanted to work in showbiz and left Varanasi for Mumbai in 2013. He found work in TV serials before graduating to films. He learned the skills of production before shifting back to his hometown during the pandemic.

Now in his early 30s, he has established Katha Films where he is focussing on Bhojpuri movies, offering his services as a line producer in Varanasi, dabbling in ad filmmaking, taking up government projects, and offering film equipment like cameras and lights on rent.

Observations

Amar is among the few on the technical side of films who have returned back to the city after spending a decade in Bollywood. "There are some actors who have done the same, but I am one of the few on the technical side who have come back to my hometown," he says.

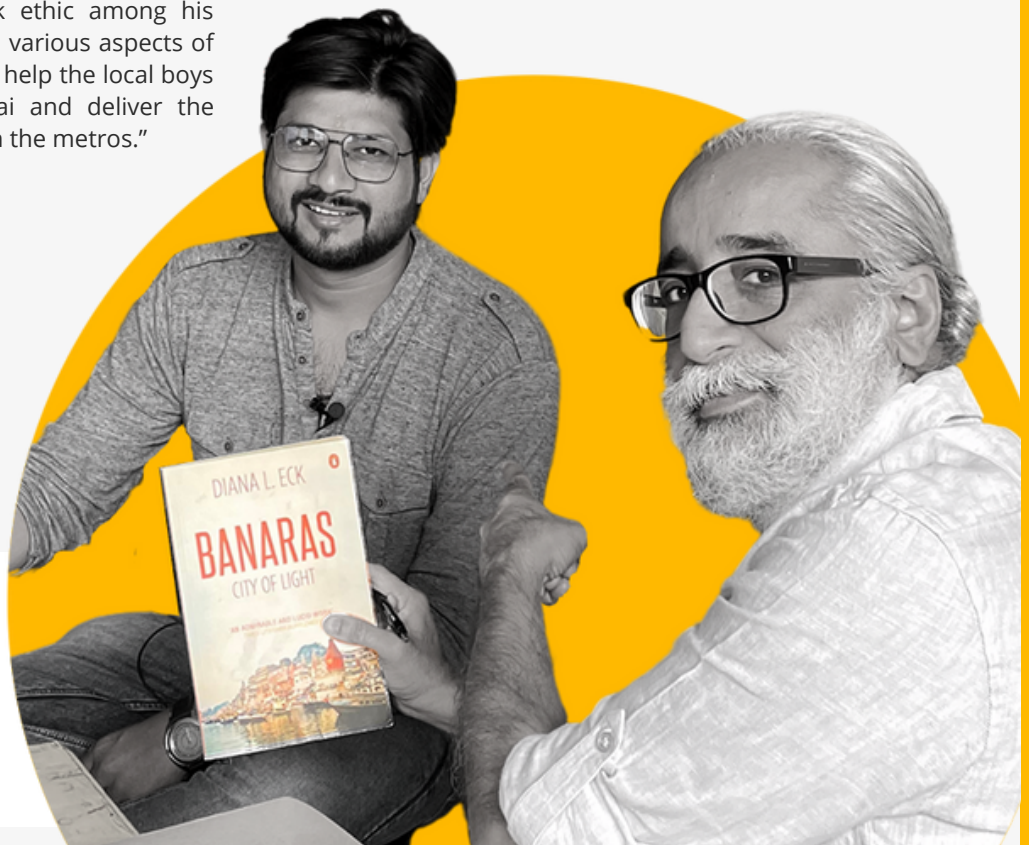
He plans to use the experience he has gained to provide the same level of services in Varanasi. He is trying to inculcate a professional work ethic among his employees by training them in various aspects of filmmaking. "My intention is to help the local boys learn the mindset of Mumbai and deliver the same quality that is available in the metros."

"My intention is to help local boys learn the mindset of Mumbai and deliver the same quality," says Amar

"I have sent two of my boys to Mumbai to receive training in special effects for two years. Once they are trained, I want them to come back so that they can do the same quality of work which we see in Mumbai, in Varanasi itself," he says.

Busy with establishing his business and investing in film equipment, **he hasn't found the time or the resources to scale up his online presence.** He has a basic page on Google My Business and his business is not active either on Facebook or Instagram (he has personal accounts there).

Currently, he employs 25 people and runs his office out of BLW in Varanasi. Apart from using software for editing and file transfers, a lot of time is devoted to WhatsApp for customer and employee interaction.



Apps on his phone include WhatsApp, Google Pay, PhonePe and ZestMoney. Most of his transactions are UPI-based. Being a film professional, he spends significant time on YouTube, Amazon Prime and Netflix. He uses the Paytm app to make payments and also book tickets because it offers better discounts. He recently purchased a 3D camera to cater to government projects and is the only person in the city with such a camera at present.

Conclusion

Amar has registered his business under the MSME sector and avails various benefits available to him through government schemes. Going forward, he wants to enhance his online presence and adopt technology to expand the business. "Digital adoption is low but we are trying to access it, so we may utilise it to expand our business," he says.



#18

'Circumspect about uploading our products on the internet'

Ayush Agrawal, Agrawal Handicraft (Business Category: Handicraft Retailing))

The shop is being run by the fourth generation of the Agrawal family and opened in the 1960s. With many of the youngsters from craftsmen families moving to the metros to pursue 'better' jobs, Ayush's family have made it their mission to keep the tradition of local craftsmen alive.

It has been challenging in recent years as the demand isn't great for wooden artefacts. Moreover, national brands have also entered the handicraft business. Yet their age-old relationships with local artisans have enabled them to deliver quality products and reach out to new customers by leveraging the internet.

Observations

Digital technology is a boon, as it helps them reach out to new customers including foreigners. Yet it also has its drawbacks. Reaching out to new customers through social media channels like Instagram and having their own website are big positives for the business.

The problem occurs when competitors not only copy their new creations but offer the same at a lower price, which has led them to be cautious when sharing images of their new productions.

"We are circumspect about uploading our products on the internet as competitors copy our designs and then sell the same at a lower price"



But he is also optimistic about digital technology, adding:

"There is merit in digital initiatives. The consumers get to know of Agrawal Handicraft through various online channels," Ayush says

Communicating through online modes has undoubtedly been a big advantage for them. Prospects contact through the business through Instagram and then the conversation moves to WhatsApp. Some customers also seek customisation which encourages the craftsmen to be innovative.

They were present on marketplaces like Amazon but a disappointing experience forced them off the platform. Ayush emphasised that they didn't mind getting their products returned but when around 30% came back damaged, it became unviable for them.

Payment from tourists is mostly cashless while their transactions with artisans are cash-based. They interact with over 50 craftsmen for sourcing their products. Many of the craftsmen are ageing and very few of the new generation are willing to continue in this not-well-paying profession.



Conclusion

Government initiatives for handicraft have encouraged Ayush to be a part of seminars and events where they showcase their new designs. Even the ban on Chinese products has provided momentum to the local handicraft industry.

The ability to engage with foreign customers has allowed them to export to countries like the USA, Japan and Australia. The access to international content and YouTube has allowed them to discover standards that exist abroad and motivated them to improve their inventory.

#19

'UPI has been a boon and a bane for us'

Shantanu Vikram Singh, Rajput & Company (Business Category: Sports & Fitness Equipment Retailing)

Rajput & Company has been in the business of sports and fitness equipment retailing for the last 87 years. Currently run by the third generation of the family—Shantanu Vikram Singh and his brothers—it has four branches in different parts of Varanasi. "The first shop was bought by my grandfather from the British in 1935. As far as our current operations are concerned we are touching some places in Bihar and trying to expand to other states like Jharkahnd," says Shantanu.

Rajput & Company is a seller of all types of sports and fitness equipment including cricket kits, badminton racquets, carrom board, dumbbells, cycles, treadmills and cross-trainers. "We are the oldest and perhaps the largest retailers of Shiv-Naresh and Cosco in Purvanchal."

Observations

The first wave of Covid saw a rise in sales as people stopped going to public gyms and tried to set up home gyms where they could continue with their exercise routine. The second wave was harder to survive but they managed to get through it without any shutdowns or layoffs.

Although things are better now, the business has been showing a dip in the last six months. Shantanu attributes this to a focus on Varanasi as a tourist destination resulting in a boom in some sectors like restaurant and lodging, sarees, and sweetmeat, and a corresponding slump in some others.

As far as shop management is concerned, most of it is digitised through systems like Tally, Marg, and Excel sheets. "We are planning to get a customised shop management software that caters to our business needs specifically," says Shantanu. As far as payment is concerned, all modes of online and offline payments are accepted including cash, cheque, NEFT and RTGS. "Post Covid we have seen a rise in UPI transactions as well."

"The introduction of UPI has been a boon and a bane for us," opines Shantanu.

"We are planning to get a customised shop management software that caters to our business needs specifically," says Shantanu



On the other hand, it has proved to be a headache for their accountants who are finding it hard to reconcile different payments of the same value with the respective sales in all their four branches.

Although the business had a strong online presence on Google My Business (GMB), Justdial, WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram, apart from a website, these initiatives are currently on pause as the digital marketing strategy of the company is being revamped.

Personally speaking, Shantanu possesses an iPhone and a Samsung Galaxy Z Fold4 smartphone and is fairly tech savvy. One can find apps like Shazam, Cred, Homescapes, CarInfo, Park Info and YouTube Music apart from the usual ones like WhatsApp, YouTube, bank/UPI apps and Netflix. He is an avid Netflix user who dedicates two hours each night to it. He possesses an Apple watch which is used only during his workout sessions.

Conclusion

They had toyed with the idea of selling their items on e-commerce platforms like Amazon and Flipkart but found their returns policy problematic. Once their revamped website is up they plan to relaunch e-commerce facilities to cater to outstation customers.

“Offering e-commerce services will make it easier for customers who come all the way from areas like Mirzapur and Ghazipur. But we will not include weighted items like dumbbells on the online catalogue because their courier costs are high,” he says. They are also listed on the Government e-marketplace portal (GeM portal) and are registered government vendors.



#20

'Trust is local'

Ashfaque Ahmad, OptiKare (Business Category: Optician)

Although Ashfaque Ahmad has been running his opticals business OptiKare for just three years, he has a deeper understanding of the industry than his experience suggests. His family has been active in the business for decades and OptiKare's sister concern—an opticals shop in Kutchery—has been serving customers for 23 years and counting. "I have been familiar with the opticals industry from childhood," says Ashfaque. "I was always interested in this business."

Currently OptiKare stocks a wide variety of spectacles, sunglasses and contact lenses. The frames range from Rs 300 to Rs 30,000 and include brands like Ray-Ban, Vogue, Luxottica, Pierre Cardin, Carrera and Versace apart from local brands.

Observations

Covid was a challenging time for all businesses and this one was no exception. "There were no customers during the lockdown but things improved once the restrictions eased. We received training from the company on how to handle customers including the use of masks and sanitisers. Doctors reduced their visits to the chamber leading us to rely on our Essilor eye testing setup."

Eye care tools is another area where the impact of digitisation is clearly visible. The most prominent of these is Eye-Ruler 2 which enables them to carry out personalised measurements for better-fitting spectacles

Currently the business is active on Facebook, Instagram and Google My Business (GMB). However, an attempt at boosting their Facebook and Instagram posts previously to scale up their digital presence failed to get good results leading them to scrap the initiative. Payments are another area where the effect of digitisation can be prominently observed. "These days, 70% of my payments are received through UPI and the rest through other methods like cash or card," says Ashfaque. He is also using tools like Google Meet and Zoom to connect with customers and company representatives.

Eye care tools and software is another area where the impact of digitisation is clearly visible. The most prominent of these tools is Eye-Ruler 2 which enables him to carry out personalised measurements for better-fitting spectacles. Bought at a cost of Rs 1.5 lakh, it measures multiple parameters like fitting heights, eye-lens distance, and pantoscopic tilt and is generating good ROI.





Conclusion

Although billing and inventory management is carried out manually at present, Ashfaque does plan to get an inventory management system to streamline the process. The plan is to obtain it from a local developer who specialises in creating opticals-related software.

"Sometimes even I don't know what stock I have, where it is kept and what its value is —so I will eventually require an inventory software," says Ashfaque, adding: "The future is going to be digital, and we have no choice but to update ourselves accordingly."



#21

'Bharat = At Least Two Businesses'

Vivek Keshari, MP Auto Vehicles Pvt Ltd (Business Category: Automotive Repair)

It was Vivek Keshari's interest in automobiles which motivated him to set up MP Auto Vehicles in 2006. With his father being a well-known nephrologist, there was family pressure on him to study further and become a doctor. But Vivek realised early on that he had no interest in higher education and decided to channel his fascination for cars to establish a car workshop.

Although it ran successfully for many years, currently the business is facing challenges. His inability to grow the venture has led Vivek to pivot. "We cannot scale the business as it is a labour-intensive activity. We need to supervise the workers full time."

Vivek has already started converting the building where the workshop is located into a school as part of the new plan. "According to me, school is the only business where there is no chance of loss. The fees are collected in advance and you keep earning all year round. It is also easier to scale. Opening another workshop is tough, opening another school is easier," he says.

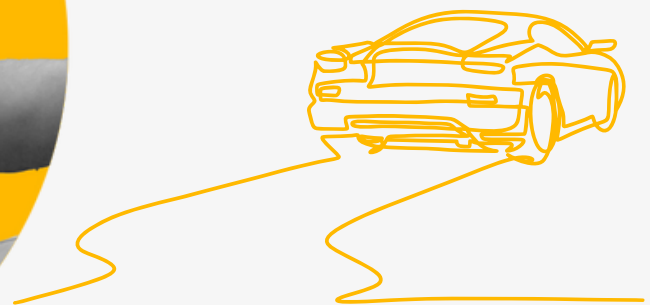
Observations

Covid, too, extracted its price on the car workshop. "In the first phase of the pandemic, we were completely out of business for three months," says Vivek. "Later we started getting some customers. But overall, business has not been like before. We do not have the base that we had earlier although things are not entirely bad."

Among digital products, Vivek has customised myBillBook to help with his invoicing. This enables him to view his data on the go. As far as payments are concerned, 90% of it is through UPI. He also relies heavily on ads (both online and offline) to get enrollments for the school.

"After Covid we learnt that if you want to make any business successful, then you will have to increase your online presence."

"In today's world, online marketing is the best way to increase your visibility and business"



Currently, they have an annual advertising budget of Rs 5-6 lakh exclusively for campaigns. Vivek has a realistic idea of how online and offline advertising work and understands what each can do for his business. "You can't get great results in just three or four months. **Right now we are burning money on digital promotion, but we have to create a market presence.**"

"For example, our play school caters to children in the 2 km radius as no parent would like to send their little kids beyond that. So we received great response from the posters we put up in local colonies but not from online ads."

As a businessman it is better for me to retain one premium customer compared to 10 that want cheaper services



Conclusion

While Vivek is aware of apps like GoMechanic which are disrupting the car repair industry, he does not see them as a threat as they cater to a different set of customers. "These apps are able to charge lower fees because the quality of the spare parts they provide is not as good as the OEMs. If you go to a proper workshop which provides genuine spare parts, it might take Rs 10,000 to repair your car. But the same job will be done by these companies for Rs 3,000 only."

It is common for him to come across customers who tell him that they are getting a cheaper deal with these apps. "We explain the difference between our services and theirs, and let the customer make the choice. As a businessman it is preferable to retain one premium customer compared to 10 that want cheaper services, because the headache is less while the earning is the same."

#22

'I depend on Pinterest'

Vishnu Agrahari, Banarasi Lal Ganesh Prasad (Business Category: Iron & Steel Fabricators)

Banarasi Lal Ganesh Prasad is a legacy business with 55 years of history behind it and deals with the manufacture of different types of iron doors, glass railings, stainless steel railings, and shed work for warehouses, for use in the construction industry. "The business was started by my grandfather and taken over by my father. I joined the business in 2012 after completing my Masters degree," says Vishnu Agrahari, the third-generation proprietor of the business.

Observations

Vishnu is highly tech-savvy and leverages this knowledge to improve various facets of his organisation. Apart from his website whose construction is currently underway, he has created business accounts on Facebook and Instagram and updates these himself using editing tools like Adobe Lightroom to spruce up the images. What's more, he has uploaded a digital catalogue on Pinterest for the use of his customers.

"For those who are not familiar with Pinterest, I pass on my phone to enable them to surf my catalogue. Ultimately, they are so happy with the experience that they usually end by confirming the order there and then," he says. Vishnu came up with the idea of using Pinterest while surfing the internet for tools that would make his business easier.

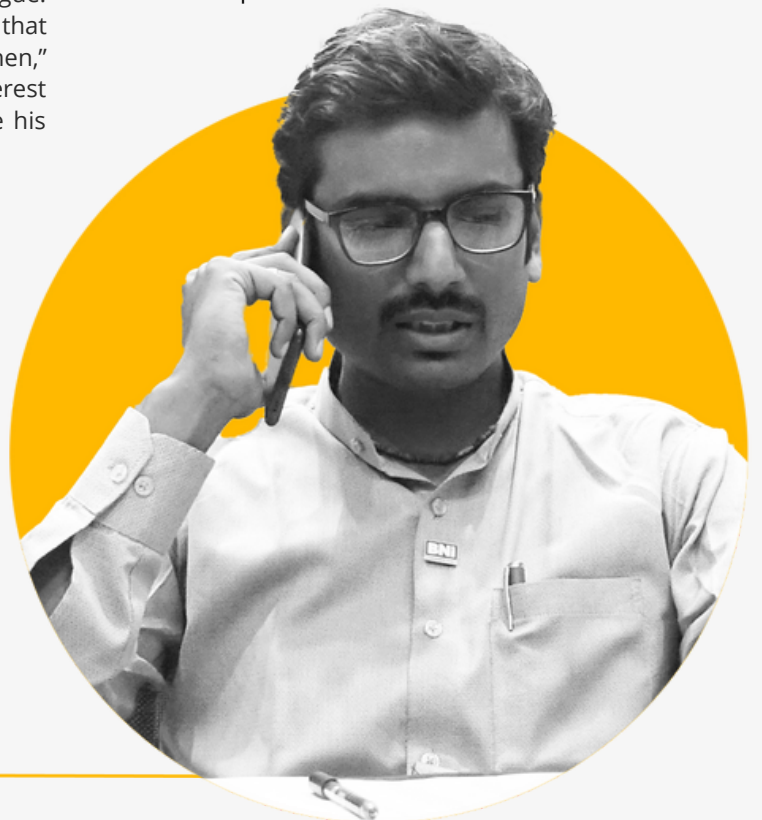
Printed catalogues are outdated these days and Pinterest is a great option for online catalogues



His office, too, comes with a TV screen attached to a memory card where photographs of all his projects can be viewed by his customers. Apart from that he has also requested his workers to carry smartphones when they are at the site so that he can communicate with them through WhatsApp.

"I create separate WhatsApp groups for those teams which are on the site so that I can communicate with them with ease. If required, I help them with the purchase of their phone. Their phone recharges are paid by me," says Vishnu

When it comes to transactions, all his payments are carried out through netbanking. "I don't use cheques or any other method." His accounting is done on Tally and currently he is using the free version of the Vyapaar app to send quotations to his customers. He also uses the Amazon Business app to procure materials for his business if required.



When it comes to online listings, the business can be found on Google My Business (GMB), Justdial and IndiaMART. While the leads from GMB and Justdial are negligible, he relies heavily on IndiaMART to both procure raw materials and to get business leads. Apart from this BNI is another important source of leads for the business. He has also used the Boost 360 app from NowFloats to create an online presence, collect payments, and reach out to customers in the past.

Since Vishnu also dabbles in stocks and is a professional mutual fund advisor, he has installed apps like Kite (Zerodha), ZFunds, MyCAMS on his phone.

Conclusion

Inventory management is still manual given the imprecise and inexact nature of invoicing in this line of work. Hiring takes place through referrals only. "The workers in this industry—though not educated—are highly skilled. As a result there are only a few pockets in Varanasi where I can find these workers. I visit these places to get workers and many times my current workers help me with referrals."

Digitising where possible and maintaining the human touch where necessary—Banarasi Lal Ganesh Prasad is ready to touch new heights of success under the able leadership of the young and dynamic Vishnu Agrahari.



#23

'I definitely see value in digital marketing'

Danish Khan and Tabish Khan, Taj Accessories (Business Category: Car Accessories)

Danish Khan's family has been associated with the auto parts sector ever since his father started a self-alternator business in 1993. Over the years the family launched multiple businesses including a battery store, a tyre and tube store, and a car accessories store. "The city lacked a proper accessories retailer. Customers used to roam around from shop to shop. We realised there was a need for such a business," says Danish, recalling the motivation behind launching Taj Accessories in 2007.

Today it is a leading retailer of all types of auto accessories including music systems, seat covers, lights and car guards and, together with its sister concerns, offers a single-point solution for all things related to car parts and accessories.

Observations

While the last couple of years were bad due to Covid, business is gradually picking up these days. Danish dismisses a question on how the business fared during the pandemic, saying, "It's better to forget the bad stuff. Let's hope that the situation does not arise again as we won't be able to handle it this time."



Currently his business is listed on Google My Business (GMB), Meesho, Justdial and he is also present on Instagram and Facebook. While the leads and orders from GMB and Meesho are negligible, Justdial is an important source of customers. Apart from this he is also listed on BNI Connect (the official app for Business Network International or BNI) and gets a reasonable number of leads from there. Word of mouth is another key source of customers for Danish's car accessories business.

In terms of payments, online is the clear winner. "Ninety per cent of our customers pay through online channels. Even a small battery cell which costs Rs 20 is paid through online channels." In terms of billing, Danish uses the Busy accounting software which he prefers over Tally. WhatsApp is used for customer communication including sharing pictures of different products.

There is no need for hiring on digital platforms as his workers are all daily wagers.

In terms of acquiring supplies, they prefer to call up the supplier rather than use digital platforms

"Although online options are available, we find it hard to trust them," says Danish, referring to the trust that has grown between him and his current suppliers by collaborating over the years. "Moreover, with online we need to pay in advance whereas with our current suppliers we enjoy 9-10 days of credit."





Conclusion

While he is unable to find the time for digital marketing, Danish does realise its value. "I do see value in digital marketing and I will definitely invest in it going forward. If business is coming by doing something, and you do not do it, then it is like getting ruined by your own actions."



#24

'Corporate clients pay online, local businesses prefer cheques'

Mohsin Raza, AHS IT Services Pvt Ltd (Business Category: Advertising, Software & Digital Marketing)

Having worked in companies like The Times of India and Rediff, establishing an ads, software and digital marketing agency was a natural career progression for Mohsin Raza.

Mohsin started AHS IT Services Private Limited in 2012. Currently he offers services like software development, website design, mobile app development, Salesforce development, content marketing, SEO, social media marketing and affiliate marketing. A second branch of the company in the US is instrumental in reaching out to customers abroad.

Observations

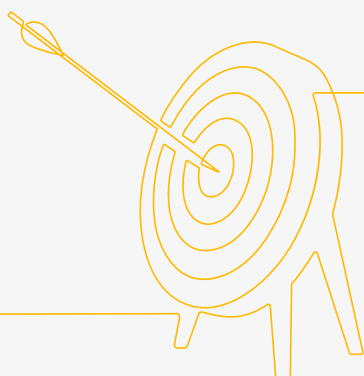
Currently Mohsin caters to dozens of clients with different requirements. He has a staff of 35 people, many of whom are working from home. Mohsin managed to get through the pandemic uneventfully and even hired a few people during this phase.

Mohsin makes it a point to hire fresh graduates as he finds it convenient to train them as per his needs

The job requires working with different types of software including Salesforce and CorelDRAW. The company also uses free versions of several software including Canva, Ubersuggest, and certain video-editing platforms. Billing is done with the help of a customised software which has been developed in-house.

As far as payments are concerned, a large majority comes through cheques or online payments. "Generally corporate customers use online modes while local businesses prefer cheques." His customers belong to varied sectors including schools, hospitals, retailers, chartered accountants, hotels and auto dealers.

Currently the company is present on online platforms like Google My Business (GMB), Justdial, Instagram, Facebook and LinkedIn (they are not very active on Twitter). Their website has been designed in-house and brings about 4-5 leads monthly which Mohsin says is adequate for a company of this size.



A bulk of the promotion is organic and the little inorganic promotion they do is targeted to raising brand awareness rather than leading to conversions. But the maximum amount of business comes from the BNI network (he has earned a revenue of Rs 4 crore in four-and-a-half years through BNI) apart from his professional contacts.

Mohsin carries two phones with him—an iPhone 13 and a Vivo smartphone. For work he uses apps like Google Ads, Google Analytics, Facebook Ads Manager, Zoom, Skype and GoToMeeting while personally he uses Cricbuzz, Hotstar and Netflix.

Conclusion

Mohsin believes that the market for digital promotion is still underdeveloped in Varanasi. Although the digital marketing spends of his clients are increasing, there is a lack of any exponential growth. The internet connection in the city is also quite poor and leaves much to be desired. While knowledge about digital marketing is increasing among business owners, especially with the advent of the new generation, there is still a long way to go.



#25

The other side of India Stack!

Shivam Agrawal, Chawal Emporium (Business Category: Rice Distribution)

Twenty-nine-year-old-Shivam Agrawal is an entrepreneur who has been **running two businesses simultaneously since the past five years—rice distribution to retail shops, and a travel business where he runs a fleet of cars to transport people across cities and states.**

Shivam is a tech-savvy person who uses technology for improving his life and also for activism. One of his businesses has no digital needs—the rice business is an “all-cash” business, be it sourcing from the villagers or selling to retailers—and his smartphone is only used for talking to people.

When it comes to his travel enterprise, the requirement changes altogether. From having a website to reaching out to customers across India, to using WhatsApp to communicate and netbanking to receive payments—he needs to do it all.

Observations

Shivam is a tech-savvy person who uses technology for improving his life and also for his activism.



He uses technology to create awareness. He doesn't like the fact that ordinary citizens are harassed on the road for minor infringements, nor that business operators who flout the rules go unpunished. As such, his motive is to bring attention to these incidents by taking snaps and videos of moving vehicles and their number plates and running them through the Parivahan app. “Many wrongs happen on the road. The common man is the one who suffers. Others with contacts and money get away. Someone has to create awareness,” he says.

Whenever he finds problems—like people plying their cars with expired insurance or licence—he uploads these videos on Instagram and tags the authorities. He has been doing this daily for the past two months. Although he has received no response from the authorities, he has set himself a 'trial period' of a year and expects some positive outcome. “I hope someone from the authorities notices these videos in the coming time and takes action.”

Conclusion

While Shivam has utilised digital means to grow his travel business, his rice business has a different character altogether. The entire trade is carried out in cash and hence that is the only option. It also doesn't appear that it will change anytime soon.

What's remarkable is Shivam's embrace of social networking. It's what gave birth to his activism which is driven by the desire to seek a response from the authorities. A perfect example of technology-enabled activism.

#26

'If there is something new, we try it out, be it online or offline'

Praveen Jaiswal, Global Tech Solution (Business Category: Surveillance & Security Products)

Praveen Jaiswal established Global Tech Solution 11 years ago. "When we started, no one was doing this business at an advanced level in Varanasi. At most, people were selling CCTV units. When we observed what was happening in big cities like Delhi—and how far behind Varanasi was in this matter—we decided to start the business here."

Currently Global Tech Solution offers all types of security and surveillance products including metal detectors, boom barriers, GPS systems and walkie-talkies and also takes up government projects. Their growth was impressive even during Covid when they remodelled their business to become the first importer/wholesaler for masks and sanitisers in the UP-Bihar region.

Observations

A seasoned tech hand, Praveen has ensured that they are present on leading online platforms like Google My Business, Justdial, IndiaMART and Sulekha. They are also present on all popular social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. Their social media pages are handled by their internal sales team. The company runs a monthly budget of Rs 30,000 on digital marketing alone.



Their website is also managed by the sales team. Considerable business is generated by referrals from BNI (Business Network International). "Unlike a lead, business from a referral is 90% confirmed."

The company runs a monthly budget of Rs 30,000 for digital marketing alone

Considering that the business is tech-driven, all employees must be well-qualified. "When it comes to technicians, the minimum qualification is B.Tech. Those who do installation work should have graduated from the ITIs."

While hiring is done through a BNI contact, Praveen uses the Vyapaar app for billing (he is also a Vyapaar distributor). He uses an app called Day-to-day Expenses to track office-related expenses. There is a long list of other apps on his phone including Justdial, Myntra, WhatsApp, WhatsApp Business, Park+, YouTube Studio, Alexa, Zoom, Google Meet and others. "There is no app on my phone which is useless," he says.

Conclusion

At the same time, Praveen is always on the lookout for new tools which will streamline his business or enable him to provide value to his customers—whether it is software or new products and technologies. "If there is something new, we try it out, be it online or offline," he says.

Short Takes

Brief Encounters On The Road

Streetside Artefacts Vendor, Sarnath

Background

The young man sells artifacts made of wood and clay—be it the Ashoka lions or a wide assortment of Buddhas. The handicrafts are sourced from local artisans.

Digital Experience

Selling his wares on the road, UPI has proven to be a big plus in receiving payments and taking care of the change.

Boat Manager, Dashashwamedh Ghat

Background

They provide boat service on the Ganga. Especially during evening aarti, tourists pack these boats to witness the half-an-hour long ceremony and then many take a ride on the river.

Digital Experience

A double-decker can be packed with around 200 people. There is a kind of commotion, a lack of space as people occupy seats all across, which makes collecting payments harder. But now, if cash isn't present, they are extremely quick in accepting payments through UPI.

What if the payment does not come through due to a bad network? They simply call up the customer later and remind them to do the needful.

Tourist Driver, Sarnath

Background

Currently in his early 30s, he studied until Class 10 and then left school to become a driver. Since then he has been transporting tourists within the city and beyond.

Digital Experience

The smartphone has been a game-changer in terms of ease of interaction with customers and also with regard to payments.

Sweet Shop Owner, Nadesar

Background

The sweet shop in Nadesar attracts people in hordes for its kachori and chole. There is also a high demand for its sweets.

Digital Experience

They accept payments through UPI. But when it comes to further digitisation, they are clear—there is no time, and what they have (i.e., UPI) is good enough.

Digital Adoption in Varanasi: Learnings

Five main characteristics stand out when it comes to digital adoption by businesses in the holy city of Varanasi.

1. Dependence on Service Providers

The recognition of the need for digital investments is nearly universal, but many small business owners feel compelled to measure ROI in an immediate sort of way and hence are conservative on actual spending. The local agency model satisfies their need to be digital, even as they are unable to pinpoint the returns.

Many SMB owners are (usually) less evolved and savvy in terms of their ability to manage their digital presence and depend on local service providers who provide design and delivery services to small businesses. Even with budgets as low as Rs 5,000 per month, which is inclusive of both design and media spend, there are digital marketing agencies who can deliver to their client's satisfaction.

2. SMB Participation in Marketplaces

Varanasi is one of the largest centres for textiles in the country, yet only a handful of business owners we met feature their products on marketplaces such as Amazon and Flipkart.

The returns policy on these marketplaces makes it unviable for small businessmen to stock and sell through them. It has been mentioned by more than one retailer that what they get through customer returns is not what has been sold and in their experience, there is no grievance redressal system to address their concerns.

To expand the participation of retailers in marketplaces, especially those in Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities, marketplace platforms need to ensure that the merchants do not end up holding the bag when end customers are dissatisfied. Free returns are a key marketing proposition for these marketplaces to attract customers, but the backend of this feature is not working well enough for the merchants, especially the smaller ones.

3. Emergence and Rise of Industry-Specific Apps

In the digital ecosystem of India, there is a wide degree of innovation that targets very specific applications for very specific industries. While some companies are focused on a billion-dollar addressable market, others are creating niche tools that are meant to alleviate specific pain points in a particular industry.

Two trends were picked up in terms of business-specific apps:

1. Drapezy is an online tool used by the saree wholesaler Samad Textiles. Upon uploading 3-4 images of a saree and at the click of a button, several images of a model wearing the same saree are created using AI. Samad Textiles, a wholesaler, uses this tool to showcase their wares to retailers who further sell the product to end customers.

2. Petpooja is an industry-specific app that is aimed at restaurants, enabling them to manage their entire operations—everything from social media marketing to billing. This software also contains a Canva-like tool called Trivit, which helps restaurant owners create banners and flyers for their marketing purposes. Trivit does not reinvent an existing app, as much as it reduces the feature-bloat of wider application software for a specific industry player.



4. Return of the Prodigals

Varanasi, like all small towns in India, acts as a source for exporting talent to the larger markets of Mumbai, Delhi, Bangalore etc. The best and the brightest usually leave town in pursuit of higher education and better employment opportunities.

However, during the pandemic, many of these folks returned home, either voluntarily or involuntarily. Vishal Singh of Vinod Diagnostic Center is a radiologist with past experience in large corporate hospitals like Fortis and Medanta, in Gurugram. During the pandemic he lost his father to Covid and triggered by the event decided to return to his hometown to build an advanced diagnostic facility.

Amar Dubey who used to work in the film industry in Mumbai returned home during the pandemic. His skills which were honed in the professional environment of Mumbai are in high demand locally in Varanasi. He currently manages a team of over 20 people producing videos for businesses and organisations.

The pandemic made them realise the difference in the cost of living in large metros versus smaller cities, and a small set of people are going back to their hometowns as they see it as a more attractive opportunity compared to big cities.

5. Serving the Larger Mufassil Market

The Gangetic belt is one of the densest populated areas in the country, and Tier 2 cities like Varanasi act as a gateway to smaller towns and villages in the surrounding district. Many business owners often use a frame of reference to address a larger market that is Purvanchal or Eastern UP.

The near ubiquity of WhatsApp has made it easier to service the smaller centres of Varanasi-based merchants. This is not just for B2B transactions but also individual sales, particularly repeat sales from satisfied customers.



Depth of Digital in the Varanasi Market

The Varanasi market contains an entire spectrum of organisations leveraging the digital economy to build businesses. At one end is a purely online business with a full-service in-house digital team targeting not just all of India but the whole world. At the other end are small businesses targeting local consumers by using local service providers at a minimal cost.

Sacred Weaves is an online storefront retailing high-end Banarasi silk sarees. Currently, they spend over Rs 20 lakh per month on digital infrastructure, software fees, and personnel costs (including Rs 10 lakh-plus per month on digital marketing). Selling a high-touch product like expensive sarees through a digital medium required them to innovate and build everything from sales strategy to customer engagement from scratch. All of this is built and managed in-house, with talent hired and trained locally, with senior roles recruited from the alumni of a world-class university (BHU).

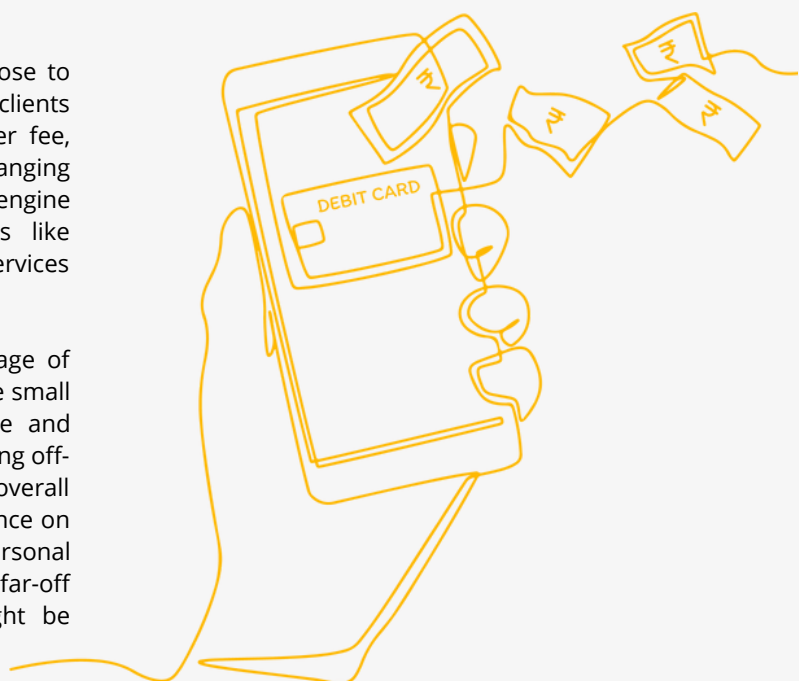
Many small businesses recognise the potential of digital but do not have the resources to build an in-house team, or the ability to self-manage. Those businesses typically depend on local service providers—digital agencies straddling everything from web/ mobile development to digital marketing delivery and management.

Mohsin Raza of AHS IT Services has delivered close to 100 websites to clients and has a roster of over 40 clients (all local) paying his company a monthly retainer fee, mainly for digital marketing services (services ranging from social media management to search engine marketing and optimisation). Small businesses like opticals to educational institutes are utilising the services of such providers for active lead generation.

Not surprisingly, there is a near-universal coverage of payments and finances being digital. Several of the small businesses we met had commissioned software and mobile apps from local developers, rather than using off-the-shelf products available on the web. The overall mood of the market seems to be one of dependence on local service providers who can provide a personal touch, rather than impersonal assurances from far-off entities, however large or successful they might be elsewhere.

Kids Gurukul, a school started 16 years ago in Varanasi, commissioned a student profile management software that helps teachers share data on how a student is performing. Unsatisfied with any of the off-the-shelf products available currently, the founder commissioned a local software development company to build this from scratch. Adnan Khan, a second-generation entrepreneur running a pest control services company, also has a software tool for customer order tracking, which was built on commission from another local service provider.

Small business owners from traditionally staid industries such as construction materials too are beginning to leverage digital tools for business purposes. Vishnu Agrahari is a third-generation metal fabrication business owner delivering finished fixtures and custom-made materials to large construction companies operating locally. Finished products typically include iron doors, glass railings, stainless steel railings etc. His business leverages Pinterest, which is used to showcase products to potential clients—creating a sort of online catalogue on the platform.

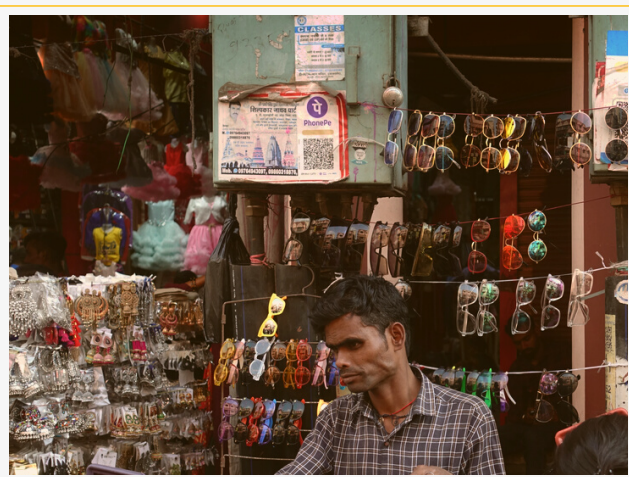


Yet, Varanasi still has a long way to go before it can be compared to the thriving landscape of leading Tier 2 cities in terms of online business and digitalisation. Despite its cultural significance and deep-rooted traditions, Varanasi faces numerous challenges on its path to becoming a formidable player in the realm of e-commerce and technological advancements.

One of the primary obstacles hindering Varanasi's progress is the digital divide that persists within the city. While the younger generation has embraced technology and the internet, a significant portion of the population, particularly the older demographic and rural areas, are yet to harness the full potential of online platforms.

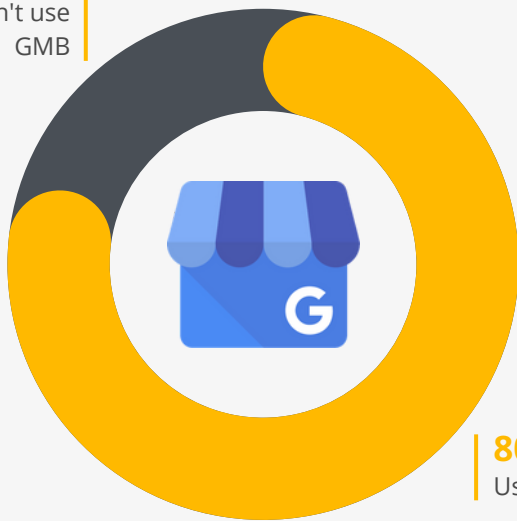
In addition to these challenges, Varanasi also faces infrastructural limitations that impede its online business potential. While some parts of the city have witnessed improvements in connectivity, there are still areas with inadequate internet speeds and unreliable network coverage.

Nonetheless, Varanasi's journey towards digitalisation is not without hope. As the city continues to cherish its cultural heritage and spiritual significance, its people are also recognising the imperative of embracing technological advancements and adapting to the digital era. With concerted efforts, collaborative endeavours, and investments in digital infrastructure, Varanasi has the potential to overcome its current obstacles and emerge as a thriving hub for online business, not only rivalling leading Tier 2 cities but also carving its own unique identity in the digital landscape.



Use of Social Networking Platforms Among Surveyed Businesses

19.2%
Don't use
GMB

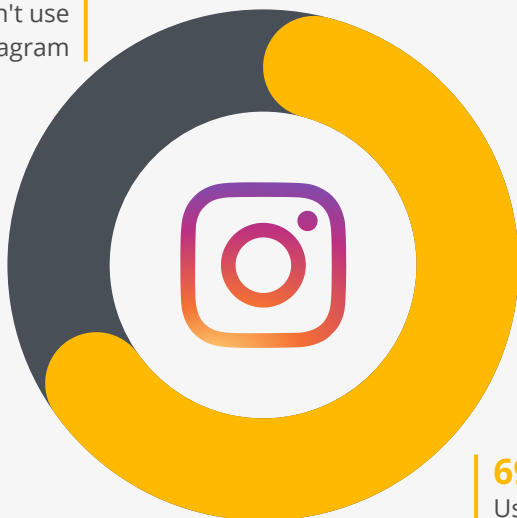


Google My Business

21 of 26 businesses surveyed use GMB

80.8%
Use GMB

30.8%
Don't use
Instagram



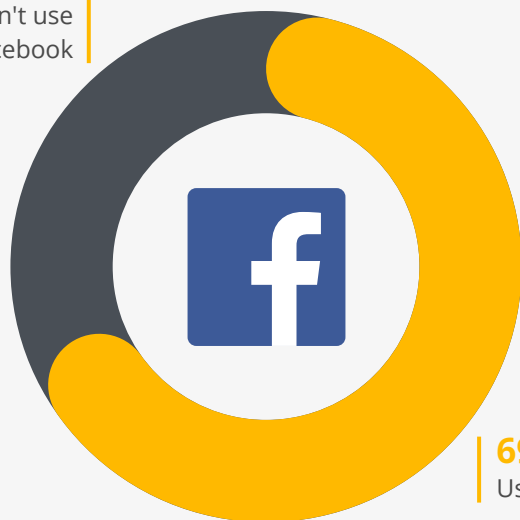
Instagram

18 of 26 businesses surveyed use Instagram

69.2%
Use Instagram

30.8%

Don't use
Facebook



Facebook

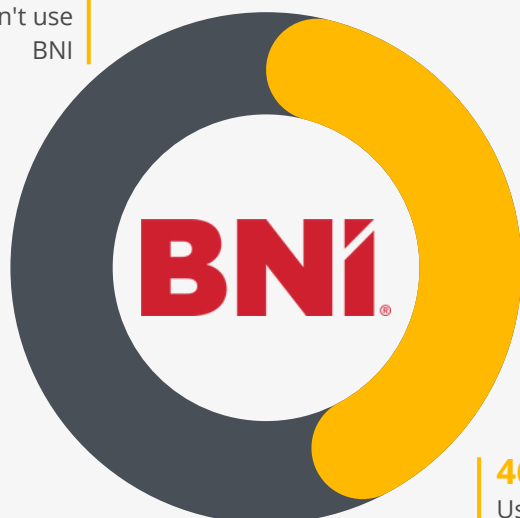
18 of 26 businesses surveyed use Facebook

69.2%

Use Facebook

53.8%

Don't use
BNI



BNI App

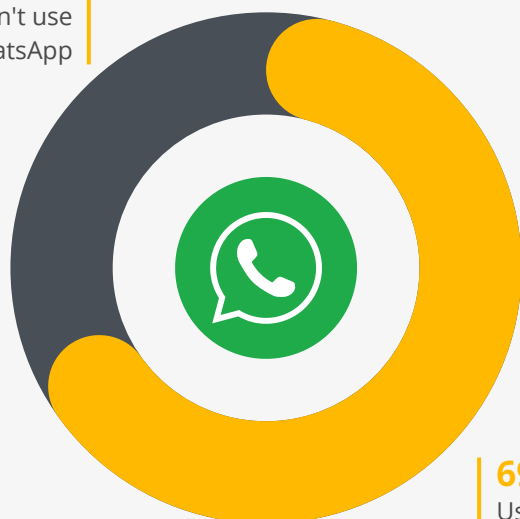
12 of 26 businesses surveyed use the BNI app

46.2%

Use BNI

30.8%

Don't use
WhatsApp



WhatsApp

18 of 26 businesses surveyed use WhatsApp

69.2%

Use WhatsApp

Meet the team



Jasminder Singh Gulati
Head - Academia & Developer
Advocacy - Marketing
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