

THE VALUE OF E-COMMERCE IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

By Soraya Ututalum and Hao Wen



“For businesses to survive during this pandemic, we must open our eyes to opportunities and venture forward armed with the right knowledge and tools.”

This was Mr. Vandong Thorn’s rallying cry after a year of keeping his Hanchey Bamboo Resort afloat in the midst of a pandemic. Before COVID-19 hit the Kingdom of Cambodia, his eco-resort catered to foreign visitors eager to bask in the country’s picturesque forests and mountains. As an in-demand tourism trend, Mr. Vandong’s popular business employed 25 locals and provided regular revenue to 10 community enterprises in the remote district of Stueng Trang, Kampong Cham.

“Our business grew after we identified and understood our customer base. This allowed us to implement a targeted e-commerce business strategy,” he proudly said, attributing the 300-percent income spike to Mekong Institute’s (MI) sessions on “Rural E-Commerce Development in the Lancang-Mekong Countries.”

Supported by the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Special Fund of P.R. China, MI’s series of trainings on rural e-commerce development equipped 44 business representatives from Cambodia, P.R. China, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Vietnam, and Thailand to participate in broader markets and access business opportunities through a seven-step strategy of customer analysis, value propositions, channels, customer relations, revenue stream, market access, and cost structure.



“E-commerce allowed us to strategically market our unique local services in a global scale,” he said, “and MI has given us the solid foundation to benefit from this platform.” He added that exposure to the competitive tourism market has also improved Hanchey Bamboo Resort’s hospitality and pricing of eco-tourism products.

With the downturn of international travel, Mr. Vandong has again diversified his business, using MI’s tested framework.

“To maintain our operations, we had to continually evolve. We are now focused on attracting local visitors to join our mountain cycling, hiking, boating, and other outdoor activities,” he said, explaining that this business approach was borne from Cambodians’ demand for recreational sports after the temporary closure of local gyms.

“We charge small groups to exercise in our vast and open grounds in adherence with our government’s health guidelines,” he shared.

In addition, Mr. Vandong has been imparting his innovative strategy to young entrepreneurs hit hard by the pandemic. “Our type of work is people- and service-centered. While we cannot have face-to-face interactions for now, we can use e-commerce to continue our businesses by selling our products and services online.”

The skills Mr. Vandong gained from MI has also opened other avenues to monetize services.

Other than managing his eco-tourism resort, Mr. Vandong has been actively training business people on e-commerce. Using MI’s training module as a basis, he has reached over 100 people since 2019. In 2021, he is expected to teach 3,000 more through a privately-sponsored e-commerce roadshow in 80 districts across Cambodia.

“We have a long way to go to build a strong and sustainable e-commerce ecosystem in Cambodia, but I am confident that with the support of MI and the growing understanding of large companies on the merits of digitalization, we will realize this dream of a global, cashless, and open trade society where all Cambodians will benefit.” ■



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To know more about MI’s work on e-commerce and SME development, please visit <https://cutt.ly/kj4yio8> and <https://cutt.ly/lj4yapp>.