

Regional cafe: Finally getting easier to start-up, attract talent and grow in Chennai

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Chennai, the capital of Tamil Nadu, has not been seen as a preferred destination for e-commerce companies or start-ups. Ironically, the very factors that worked against the city (conservative, tech-heavy) are turning to its advantage. Chennai now offers excellent intercity and intracity connectivity. There is ample capacity in the real estate sector to lease, rentals are attractive, and housing capacity is available for future growth. Many technology-enabled companies are coming up in the B2C space. It used to be all B2B in Chennai.

What was taking shape in the last 10 years seems to have speeded up in the last five. People are venturing into familiar and not-so-familiar areas. Take the example of PurpleTeal, which operates Tweak & Eat, an AI-powered wellness app for weight management. Narayanan Ram, a Silicon Valley entrepreneur who shifted to Chennai for personal reasons, founded the company with Anand Subra based in the US.

services to start PurpleTeal mobile health services. The company offers mobile health apps in partnership with telcos.

“We had to do something innovative to scale up and also create a brand,” says Ram. The Tweak & Eat app was launched a year ago. It is a disruptive and innovative direct-to-consumer app and service that connects subscribers to certified nutritionists who provide real-time, ‘just-before-you-eat’ personalised advice. Tweak & Eat has a presence in the US, India, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines.

All one needs to do is take a picture of the plate of food, and Tweak & Eat’s AI-enabled camera feature will ‘sense’ it and make appropriate calorie recommendations as one eats. The AI platform is well-trained to differentiate between deep-fried and grilled or stir-fried or baked food.

Tweak & Eat has crossed 1,00,000 ‘tweaks’ in the last six months. The basic ‘tweak’ function and other functions like Tweak Wall and Recipe Wall are free of cost. Certain other functions where a user can get hand-holding by an assigned nutritionist are subscription-based. Tweak & Eat supports integration with devices such as Fitbit and iWatch, and enables personalised reminders to be set for breakfast, lunch, dinner and other meal times.

PickYourTrail was founded by Hari Ganapathy and Srinath Shankar in 2014. For four-and-a-half years, they remained a bootstrapped and profitable start-up. In February 2019, PickYourTrail raised series A funding of \$3 million from leading players in the start-up ecosystem in Chennai, including Girish Mathrubootham of Freshworks, Kumar Vembu of GoFrugal, Rajagopal Subramanian of Entrust Family Office, and Shyam Sekhar of iThought.

As of January 2019, PickYourTrail has helped curate more than 8,000 international trips. It has the highest five-star rating on Facebook, making it one of the top-ranked trip planners in the country.

Shankar and Ganapathy recognised a felt need in the travel space and took the plunge. Their friends were getting married and planning a honeymoon, and many of them wanted a one-stop travel site. They have built a consumer-friendly platform where one can book multi-country vacations online with the help of a few clicks. The travel is personalised and customised.

“Everyone wants to enter the travel industry. One of our biggest challenges is how do we differentiate and stay relevant. We have taken some calls like we will do only international vacations, not domestic, and will only operate in markets where supplies are online,” the founders say.

Ganapathy adds their target customers are people aged 25-32, double income no kids, or 40-45 year olds—families where kids are mature enough and parents want to take them to places. “We are not a site that throws an itinerary at you; we understand your needs and there is a certain amount of personalisation that is built into our algorithms, and then once the itinerary is built we entirely customise it.”

The founders say what sets PickYourTrail apart is its unique matching algorithm and price comparison engine that helps vacationers customise their tour packages suited to their preferences at the best online prices. AI and machine

HipBar is an alcoholic beverages delivery site promoted by Prasanna Natarajan, who says aims at helping India drink wisely. He raises eyebrows when he says if sales are digitised, much-needed transparency will come into the business and it will help the government. HipBar is an RBI-approved mobile wallet meant for transacting adult drinks. The idea struck him when the Supreme Court banned highway bars. It was time to go digital.

The original idea was to create a 'bar on the cloud'. You could buy a bottle, put it on the cloud, and drink it anywhere. This means a customer could order a bottle of alcohol of his or her choice on HipBar, go to a restaurant or a pub or a hotel, mention the HipBar order, and have the drink. That has not quite worked out.

HipBar operates through HipBar App and HipBar Pay. Through HipBar App, customers can browse drinks, pay for them, and pick these up at their convenience at HipBar-affiliated retail stores, or gift to friends through the app. With HipBar Pay, users can pay for their drinks. Till date, HipBar has acquired 3,06,933 customers across 10 cities of operation. In 2018, Diageo India invested `27 crore in HipBar.

Prasanna is confident HipBar will eventually be able to navigate through Byzantine laws that control liquor industry and a trade that is not tech-savvy and suspicious of new ways of doing business. He is convinced this is the way to go in a country where alcohol consumption is growing. "We will not sell to under-age customers. Restrictions are built in," he says. Prasanna must be doing something right as he is about to get a second round of funding. It is getting easy to start-up, attract talent and grow in Chennai. The city is fast catching up with its peers.

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PM Modi heads to Kedarnath for meditation — see pics

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One of the biggest fashion events of the year is in full swing and we can't get enough of our favorite celebrities' looks! Let's take a look at them at Cannes 2019