



Digital Marketing as the Global Marketing Initiative: A Case Study of Al-Gohar Traders

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Abstract

The rise of E-commerce and digital marketing strategies has provided businesspeople with ample cost-efficient and effective opportunities to create new start-ups or expand their current businesses in the Business-to-Business (B2B) and Business-to-Consumer (B2C) arenas. This case initially highlights the role digital marketing played in initiating a B2B start-up in the rock salt industry of Pakistan. Then, it describes how the online showroom (B2B Websites), search engine optimization, email marketing, paid marketing at b2b portals, social media marketing, and e-commerce initiatives supported AlGohar Traders in establishing itself in the global arena and then expanding its market share in those international countries in such a small period with minimal marketing resource utilization. After highlighting the role of digital marketing, the case talks about the hurdles AlGohar Traders faced in this industry and the possible solutions to those problems.

1 Introduction

In 2003, Shah Shamas ul Arifeen Hamdani, a newlywed, pondered how to make ends meet. He belonged to a middle-class family in Quaidabad, a small town, in the Khushab district of Punjab. His father owned and ran a small restaurant cum truck stop named Hamdani Hotel, which he had inherited from his father, while his elder brother, named Peer Syed Mehdi Shah, owned a small factory, which comprised a small crushing plant and some drills. From this vicinity, he used to supply crushed rock salt, drilled rock salt, and raw rock salt slabs to some areas of Punjab. Shamas ul Arifeen Hamdani, however, had recently graduated from International Islamic University, Islamabad, with a master's degree in Shariah and Law (LLM).

His family expected him to pursue the field in which Shamas had invested so much time and money, but Shamas had other plans. He had worked in the legal industry for 2

months, which gave him a clear idea that working in this industry meant lying and deceiving others. He had even received his license for practice, but he did not want to pursue this field because being truthful in it meant nothing but a loss of time and effort, and his religion and conscience did not let him earn money by deceit and lies. Thus, he decided to opt for something else.

When Shamas's family heard about his plans, they were unhappy, and, like a typical Pakistani family, they began pressuring him to pursue his field or face a bleak future. At that time, things were becoming difficult for him; he was unemployed, had a wife to support, and was given a total of 3000 rupees as monthly pocket money for himself and his wife. Hence, he was agitated, and due to the continuous pestering of his family, he was unable to think correctly. He was adamant about not pursuing the legal industry, but without other qualifications, he could not find a job elsewhere. Furthermore, he lacked the capital to start a business.

Tired of it all, he visited his in-laws in Karachi to relax and think properly. During his 15-day stay, he visited numerous businesses and factories, seeking new ideas, industry gaps he could leverage, or even the slightest push in the right direction. During the last few days of his stay, he visited a company that dealt mainly with Natural Himalayan Rock Salt Products. Although located in Karachi, most of the company's revenues came from orders taken abroad via the company's website. After viewing that company's business model, Shamas ul Arifeen Hamdani became inclined to work in the salt industry as well, as his elder brother had good ties with the suppliers of rock salt, though, at this stage, he did not have a clear business execution plan.

When Shamas reached his hometown, he started working on the rough business idea he had developed in Karachi (Mora Cortez & Lecaros, 2024). Initially, he began to list the resources he could utilize to establish his business. He had only a few thousand rupees as startup capital, basic IT skills, limited marketing knowledge, no computer, no office, no company registration, no export license, and some references in the local salt sector, courtesy of his elder brother. Despite such a shortage of start-up resources, he visualized a business. A business that would grow and support him, and establish and support educational and welfare institutions in his locality. He did not know the business's name

yet, but he was determined to create a company that would become one of Pakistan's major players in the rock salt industry.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Salt and Its Reserves in Pakistan

Salt is a mineral consisting of two elements: sodium and chloride. This mineral is vital to humans, as every food item is tasteless without it. Furthermore, it is also essential for plants and animals, but in small quantities. However, if consumed in excess, this mineral can be highly hazardous (Nafees et al., 2013).

Like other minerals, salt has vital uses in the industry as well. (Hussain et al., 2021) It is a strategic product used in various industries, including pulp and paper production, cosmetics, pharmaceuticals, drilling, tanning, food, and household use. (Prabawa & Bramawanto, 2021) Salt is required to manufacture sodium bicarbonate, caustic soda, HCL (hydrochloric acid), and many other chemicals worldwide (Hills, 2022).

Earth has an unlimited salt supply, as every nation has naturally occurring salt deposits or salt harvesting units in the form of solar evaporating operations. This salt supply comes from four primary sources: rock salt, sea salt, lake salt, and underground salt water. According to Hussain et al. (2021), Pakistan contains the largest salt reserves in the world, with a proven quantity of 10 billion tons of salt with a purity level of 98% NaCl (Sodium Chloride). It is also one of those fortunate countries blessed with all three types of salt, i.e., Rock Salt, Sea Salt, and Lake Salt (Sharif et al., 2007).

2.2 Global Demand and Supply of Salt

The total value of salt exports in 2019 totalled 2853.783 million US Dollars. The Netherlands was the largest contributor to this figure, with its total exports equalling 287.36 million US\$. Most of the Netherlands' revenue came from selling industrial salt. Second was Germany, with exports of salt worth 264.86 US\$ (TDAP, 2021).

2.3 Salt Industry of Pakistan

Pakistan has all three salt sources: rock salt, sea salt, and lake salt. Despite such reserves and sources, it only produces 4 million tons, contributing just 1.33% of the world's production, and sells it worldwide (TDAP, 2021).

2.4 Digital Marketing

Digital Marketing, also known as ‘web’ or ‘internet’ marketing, covers all marketing endeavours that utilize an electronic device or the Internet. It is an umbrella term encompassing online advertising, brochures, email marketing, search engine marketing, social media, the company’s website, etc. Companies leverage all or some of these channels to remain in touch with their current customers and connect with future ones (Desai, 2019).

In the current era, marketing a business’s products/services nationally and internationally is the most cost-effective option. The main explanation is that, due to technological advancement, almost everyone can access smartphones and other electronic devices. Thus, it becomes incredibly convenient and cheap for businesses to target their potential customers (Qureshi & Rehman, 2018), regardless of whether it is B2B or B2C.

2.5 Theoretical Framework

2.5.1 Resource-Based View (RBV):

The story of Shamas utilizing minimal resources (PKR 5000, an old computer, and computer and internet access) to build a competitive advantage through internal capabilities reflects RBV theory, where unique internal resources lead to strategic advantage.

2.5.2 Entrepreneurial Process Model:

The stages of opportunity recognition, resource mobilization, venture creation, and growth through innovation and market expansion mirror traditional models of entrepreneurship.

2.5.3 Digital Marketing & E-commerce Adoption Theory:

The strategic use of B2B platforms, SEO, email marketing, and later social media aligns with digital transformation frameworks, particularly in SMEs.

2.5.4 Internationalization Theories (Uppsala Model):

The gradual expansion into foreign markets through online presence and later physical visits shows incremental internationalization.

2.5.5 Strategic Management & Competitive Advantage:

The case reflects Porter's generic strategies (especially differentiation and cost leadership), as well as reaction to market competition and changing strategic priorities.

3 Methodology

In this research, a case study approach has been used as the most favoured method of the researchers (Rashid et al., 2019), especially when they need information about an organization, event, personality, or any other matter in the practical context. This approach also answers four Ws and one H (what, where, when, why, and how) of a specific subject, which results in an understanding of complex issues (Crowe et al., 2011).

4 Findings & Discussion

4.1 Company profile

4.1.1 Establishment of Algohar Traders

Shamas's resources totaled a meagre 5000 PKR, with which he could neither establish a factory nor rent a tiny office. Secondly, since he was not a business graduate and his elder brother was running the business via the local Pakistani (unregistered) way, he had no idea how to start his business.

The first thing he did was to ask his father to give him a tiny place at the hotel so that he could establish his office without spending any money on rent. His father agreed, and he opened the office of a company that did not even have a name yet. The office has a small table, a chair, and a telephone line. The table supported his old Pentium 3 computer, on which he would spend countless hours each day, browsing the internet on the dial-up connection, trying to find any information that could help him move forward.

One day, while browsing through Yahoo (one of the famous search engines of that time), he came across a website named diytrade.com, a B2B (business-to-business) trade portal that offered free online space and a subdomain. Shamas signed up and discovered he was about to build his free website. When the portal asked him about his company's name, he named it Al-Gohar Traders without any prior thought or reason. He also named the website algohar-salt-world.diytrade.com, as he did not own the domain and had not paid for it to diytrade.com. So, the website gave him a subdomain on its domain. Once

registered, he felt his business had been established; however, that was not the case. The next day, he received an email from diytrade.com asking him to provide proof of company registration. Thus, he registered with the company within the next week and uploaded his certificate on the portal, which approved his membership. The following week, he opened the company bank account, and Al-Gohar Traders was finally established.

4.1.2 Company Profile of Al-Gohar Traders

He capitalized on this information since his brother owned a small rock salt crushing and drilling plant. He introduced his company as a 'Rock Salt Products Manufacturer' from Quaidabad, near Pakistan's Himalaya Warcha Salt mines. The main aim of his company was to export Himalayan Rock Salt products to global import companies. When asked why, he stated that the global countries were more significant markets, and the cash flow was faster and easier than in the local market of Pakistan. Initially, his company focused on building international clients, and later, it also aimed to further expand by establishing global partnerships.

4.1.3 Product Categories and Product Line

Initially, the company manufactured and sold multiple product types under natural Himalayan rock salt lamps, natural salt candle holders, salt licks for animals, crushed pink, red, and white edible salt, industrial salt, and raw rock salt lumps. When the business started expanding, Shamas ul Arifeen Hamdani gradually increased the products under the current categories and added new ones, such as machine-made/handcrafted Rock Salt lamps, crafted candle holders, rock salt tiles for construction, rock salt cooking and serving plates, black salt (multiple sizes), salt inhaler, natural white rock salt lamps, natural grey salt lamps, natural and fancy USB salt lamps, bath salts, rock salt massage stones and rock salt glasses.

4.1.4 The Online Showroom

Shamas ul Arifeen Hamdani created his website to attract business clients from across the world, rather than typical consumers. As a result, his website was not an e-commerce store; instead, it was an online showroom that showcased his product offering. Even this showroom was essential, as he used the free version of Day Trade, which only offered basic themes and limited product display options. Still, he utilized every bit of the online space

and displayed all the company and product information to the best of his ability. It may not have been spectacular, but it fulfilled the requirements.

4.2 Business Progress

4.2.1 First Client

The limited free version of diytrade.com only offered him a few keywords per product and a limited number of products overall. However, he stood out by providing a better company profile than his competitors. He updated his website daily by posting a new product or updating the current product with better descriptions or new pictures. He continued to do this hard work for over 10 months before he had any success. He received an inquiry from a company in Poland, which was run by Mr. Thamuz Surubaka in 2004. Shamas made some negotiations with him online via email and online chat messenger. After a week of negotiation, Mr. Thamuz ordered a 20-foot container load with an invoice value of 5000 Euros.

During the negotiation, Shamas persuaded Mr. Thamuz to pay 50% in advance, with the remaining amount due upon shipment of the order. The 50% advance (2500 Euros) allowed Shamas to pay for the required goods, but it was no easy task. Since his brother's factory could only provide semi-finished, drilled, and washed rock salt natural pieces, Shamas had to travel to Faisalabad to procure the wooden base and the packaging cartons for the salt lamps. It was no easy task as the suppliers were unwilling to accept an order with such customized sizes and low MOQ (minimum order quantity). So, within 15-20 days, the order was manufactured and ready to ship. For the shipping, he hired a company named Sea Gold, which shipped the container to Poland and provided him with the Bill of Lading and the necessary documents, which he sent to his buyer. He received the remaining payment for the container. This was not a one-time sale but rather the beginning of a long-term business partnership.

4.2.2 Registration for Other Portals

Motivated by this success on diytrade.com, he started registering on other business-to-business (B2B) trade portals so that his company could get maximum international exposure and attract other clients worldwide. Other trade portals included Alibaba.com, ec21.com, and eclaza.net. On these platforms, he added his company profile and 10 products, as he was a free member at all these portals, and they only allowed 10 products

for every free profile. Most importantly, he also linked all these portals to his online showroom created on diytrade.com.

These efforts started to pay off gradually as he received more inquiries from his Diytrade website. Soon after, he secured another client, Mr. Danielle from Italy, who also ordered a 20-foot Container load. Along with these massive orders, gradually, he also started getting inquiries for LCL (less than container load) orders from other countries like Taiwan, Germany, the Netherlands, and the United States of America.

Shamas discussed with his elder brother to fulfill all these orders, and they decided to upgrade their factory for export orders. They installed new cutters for manufacturing rock salt tiles, new drills for different sizes of lamps and candle holders, established a new department for adding wooden bases to the lamps, and a separate quality control and packing department that could monitor the export orders and ensure the premium quality of the products and the packaging. So, by 2006, the factory had received its first upgrade.

4.2.3 Consolidation of Clients

To establish a more substantial business bond with his clients and create a trustworthy partnership, Shamas decided to visit his clients in Europe. He met his clients in Poland and then in Italy. While in Italy, he considered meeting prospective clients when he received an email from a large German salt-importing company, which had visited his website multiple times and was now interested in establishing a business relationship. Shamas told him that he wanted to meet him in person, and coincidentally, the buyer was in Italy at that time as well. He met the German buyer at a trade fair, where he secured an order for a container.

4.3 Promotional Strategies

4.3.1 Paid Online Marketing

By the end of 2007, Shamas only had a free account at the major online B2B portals. In early 2008, he finally decided to purchase the premium membership of diytrade.com. Thus, he paid 250US\$ to the portal via TT (Telegraphic Transfer). They provided him with an independent domain (alghar-salt-world.com) and agreed to implement strategies to get his products listed at the top of search engines like Google, Yahoo, and msn.com. Additionally, they would provision extra keywords per product and offer the option to list

all their products in Chinese. Diytrade also started to list Al-Gohar Traders as a top supplier in its portal whenever someone searched for rock salt products.

In 2009, Shamas also purchased a trust pass membership of Alibaba.com for around 300 USD. When Alibaba.com (the largest B2B portal of the time) received this payment, it displayed Al-Gohar Traders as one of its trusted and verified suppliers. Furthermore, the listing of products was gaining prominence and channelling the rock salt inquiries towards Al-Gohar Traders. Shamas also took maximum benefit from these offerings and focused on effectively marketing his company and products online so that he could grow more. These efforts resulted in a phenomenal increase in his revenue. By 2009, he was averaging a sale of around 20-foot containers per month, or a monthly revenue of \$ 90,000 -\$120,000, and an annual revenue of over \$ 1.2 million.

Such orders required a complete overhaul of his brother's factory. Rather than expanding the factory himself, Shamas was given a space of around 4000 square yards on deferred payment, where he started to build his state-of-the-art factory. When the factory was constructed, Shamas had to fulfil these orders by purchasing additional products from the local wholesale market.

4.3.2 Search Engine Optimization (SEO)

By 2009, Shamas had a well-established export business and a fully functional factory. He had around 40 employees and four supervisors, but no marketing manager or associate. This was because no proper marketing managers were available in the small town of Quaidabad, Khushab. Any individual with a master's degree would typically relocate to other small cities. So, Shamas was the only one responsible for digital and other forms of marketing. However, since he was not a professional marketer, he did not know how to perform SEO himself. Still, he did what he knew and kept posting new products/updating old ones, posting in Chinese, and signing up for free B2B portals whenever he found one. Despite such odds, amazingly, his website started showing up on the first page of Google whenever someone searched 'rock salt Pakistan,' 'Himalayan salt wholesale,' and 'salt lamps.'

4.3.3 Email Marketing

Even though Shamas was not a professional marketer, he thirsted to expand his business. Thus, he resorted to another online marketing method when he had filled his websites to the brim and could not post any more products, keywords, or company profiles in other languages. He would sit up late at night and take out the contact details of all other foreign buyers. Then, he divided the buyers by country and sent his company introduction and product catalogue to each, 10 emails a day. Most of the prospective buyers did not reply at once. Some did not reply; however, out of all the emails sent, 15% resulted in inquiries on average, of which 5% translated into new orders. The other emails were not wasted either, as around 50% of them led to an investigation within a year of the email being forwarded, many of which were also translated into new orders.

In this manner, he unintentionally created a country-wide database of international buyers and kept in touch with them by sending them monthly and seasonal offers. He did not send more emails, so the buyers did not treat him like a spammer. Apart from emails, he would also send his company introductions to other prospective buyers on platforms like Alibaba Messenger, Yahoo Messenger, and other live messengers. For these activities, Shamas had not created a specific time slot; instead, he would do them while he was free at home or in his factory.

4.3.4 Social Media Marketing

When the social media boom came to Pakistan, many companies started promoting their companies on Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and other social media handles by creating company pages and paid ads. However, Shamas was late in creating his impression here as he was extremely busy with his existing orders and catching up with the latest digital marketing practices.

In 2013, he created the Facebook page of Al-Gohar Salt World and started posting his products on this platform. Gradually, the page got attention as he filled it with daily updates. However, due to his other responsibilities, he hired an individual to update the Facebook page, in addition to his other managerial duties. Since the person was not well-versed in this field, his posts were not up to standard.

Many of his former and current clients liked his page because they received new product updates from it. His page's posts also attracted other types of people, such as

individual buyers, lovers of the products, and some who wanted to open an online store of Himalayan Rock Salt products.

4.3.5 E-Commerce Initiative in Europe

In 2015, a person interested in opening an e-commerce store approached Shamas via email. That individual was a Pakistani based in Germany, whom Shamas agreed to meet during his next European visit. Mr. Naveed greeted Shamas warmly upon his arrival in Germany and presented his proposal. It was a 50-50% partnership dealing mainly in B2C (Business to Consumers) and B2B (Business to Business) transactions in Germany. In German, this venture was named 'AlGohar Salzwelt' or AlGohar Salt World.

When Shamas came to Pakistan, he sourced a company to create an e-commerce store for this venture. Al-Gohar Saltwell was launched, attracting good revenue due to its affordable prices and high quality. However, after around 7 months, when the business was getting a great B2C response and a good B2B response, Mr. Naveed started concealing things from Shamas. However, Shamas was informed of Mr. Naveed's actions by his clients in Germany. They told him he was building his salt business empire by using Shamas's supply line, public relations, and other support rather than expanding AlGohar Saltwelt. Consequently, Shamas went to Germany to close AlGohar Saltwelt, and the e-commerce venture was closed.

4.3.6 Second E-Commerce Initiative

For years, Shamas was too preoccupied with wholesale orders to have a proper marketing plan or sales department, which prevented him from attempting to open another e-commerce venture. However, in 2022, he began planning e-commerce operations across America and Europe, utilizing Amazon drop shipping and local retail through the opening of another e-commerce store. For this purpose, he took his nephews, Abdullah and Ameen Hamdani, on board, who had Amazon drop shipping and online retail experience. Still, the e-International retail business could not take off as Shamas himself was too busy with operational things, and the young kids could not get the required support. Furthermore, the local retail business could not be established as the market was underdeveloped. Shamas still plans to open retail businesses internationally and locally, but he is more focused on wholesale to date.

4.3.7 Leaving Paid Memberships

Due to the support of paid memberships of diytrade.com and Alibaba.com, Al-Gohar Traders can be found on the first two pages of Google.com despite such tough competition. However, the prices of these memberships increased annually, to the extent that the trust pass membership of Alibaba.com cost around 3000 USD/year in 2016. At that time, Shamas decided that since most of his inquiries came from diytrade.com, he renewed his trust pass membership and reverted to the free one. Although Alibaba.com did not provide him with more inquiries, it ensured that AlGohar Trader's presence was on the top pages of every platform.

Similarly, in 2022, when Diytrade.com increased its membership price to 700US\$, Shamas decided to build his independent website and market it himself. Thus, he did not renew his membership and became a free member at diytrade.com again. His website, AlGohar-salt-world, was ready within 15 days, but it could not be seen even in the initial 10 pages of Google when the relevant keywords were searched. His dominance on the digital platforms had ended.

4.3.8 Digital Comeback Plan

Even though his website did not appear when the relevant keywords were searched, his business remained stable, as international buyers from Africa to Australia knew him by name. However, to stage a comeback in the digital platforms, he decided to have a multilingual website built with the name algoharsalt.com and have a team of professionals handle it and all other digital marketing areas, such as social media, SEO, SEM, etc., so that Al-Gohar Traders could make a digital comeback. Currently, his website is under development, and he expects it to be launched by December 2024.

4.4 Achievements

4.4.1 Awards and Recognition by the Government of Pakistan

Due to Shamas's hard work and dedication, AlGohar Traders started from scraps and became a powerful local and international salt industry force. When his company hit an annual sale of 1 million US\$+ in 2009-2010, it never came down. Instead, it remained stable or increased from that figure. This is why he received the best export award from the Sargodha Chamber of Commerce and Industry Chairman in 2010, 2012, and 2018, and

from the President of Pakistan in 2022 for the best exports in the Sargodha division. Figure 1 below shows the awards and recognitions received.

Figure 1 Awards and Recognitions



4.4.2 Global Presence

By 2024, despite some setbacks, AlGohar Traders had a customer base in 32 countries, with a strong position in Taiwan, Germany, Turkey, Poland, South Korea, the USA, and the Netherlands. To achieve this feat, Digital Marketing supported AlGohar Trader throughout its journey.

4.5 Hurdles Faced

AlGohar Traders' successful journey was not smooth. Instead, it was riddled with multi-dimensional hurdles that tested the perseverance of Shamas and his team, who pushed through them to reach where they are now. His company's main hurdles were operational hurdles and high competition due to low industry entrance barriers.

4.5.1 Operational Hurdles

Clinching orders was one difficulty, but fulfilling those orders opened doors to unlimited challenges in the salt industry of Pakistan, where mining infrastructure is still ancient. This challenge would become a nuisance during the monsoon season when the

Christmas season orders would peak, but the mines would close as they would be filled with rainwater. This would result in a shortfall of raw material, and if Shamas had not stocked up hundreds of tons of raw material in advance, the orders would get delayed. This hefty purchase required Shamas to lock up additional cash, a facility he did not have in the early years, which resulted in him delaying or even losing some of those orders.

The second major hurdle is dynamite, which is used in the traditional mining method for Rock Salt. Sometimes, PMDC (Pakistan Mineral Development Corporation) runs short on dynamite, resulting in a shortfall in industry production.

The third hurdle was the lack of electricity. Continuous load-shedding of electricity, especially during the summer, would cause considerable delays in production. Shamas tried to find alternative electricity sources, but the options were not feasible. Thus, this issue remains unsolved, although he has arranged for some small generators to power the minor machinery. He has to battle the electricity shortage and the current order deadlines.

4.5.2 Market Competition

Compared to other industries, the rock salt industry of Pakistan requires lower capital for manufacturers and even lower capital for traders. Furthermore, in 2013, even the small manufacturers, who possessed 100 square yards of space and a single driller and cutter, started posing as huge manufacturers and directly entered the export market by making their websites. Secondly, to gain market share, they offered rock-bottom prices to prospective buyers, who were dumbfounded by the low prices. The buyers demanded the same prices from their old suppliers, but when these suppliers refused to conduct business at such low prices, they ordered from these small manufacturers. In this manner, AlGohar Traders, like other factories, lost a significant number of clients in the short term; however, when small manufacturers could not handle the volume or quality, the clients started to revert to their old suppliers.

4.6 Way Forward

To increase their market share in the global market, it is paramount for AlGohar Traders to open an in-house marketing department rather than relying on freelancers or outsourced companies. It needs to hire separate specialized professionals for B2B and B2C sales so that the B2B personnel can focus on getting new clients and establishing digital dominance by conducting multilingual SEO on the latest state-of-the-art digital showroom. The b2C

personnel can develop and capitalize on the rudimentary consumer market by seizing the first mover's advantage.

Currently, the company is mainly run as a one-person show, and if it wants to grow, it needs to establish new departments and decentralize its operations. Updating its current production technology can also give the company a cost and production efficiency advantage. Although AlGohar Traders is doing exceptionally well, there is still ample room for improvement, and much market share needs to be captured. To achieve this, Al-Gohar traders should consider opening international offices in Germany (for Europe) and the USA.

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