

“The community campaigns directly reach the people.”: Naiy Keomisay and Darling Thongphachan, Laotian volunteers helping build a market for reading glasses in Laos, on demand creation and the supply and sale in retail stores.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard

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Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Please introduce yourself and tell me about how you started doing eyeglasses.



Naiy Keomisay: Eyeglasses is one of the projects I do with Eric Wong Poh Sang. He planned the business and asked me to join, and I wanted to work with him to support people. I look for buyers, do quotations and invoice work, and shipments. We have one main big buyer, Fred Hollows, and other wholesale customers for the small shop, and retail customers at the Big C [markets] and pharmacies.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: You are accountable for getting the supply in and moving it to the customers?

Naiy Keomisay: Yes.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Can you talk about that process, you do it through VisionSpring?



Darling Thongphachan: Yes. We order directly from VisionSpring, and they ship it to us. We have our warehouse.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Does that warehouse have all the products from the sheet store too?



Darling Thongphachan: Yes. We are using Eric's store. Once we have an order, we pack it up. We don't have a job description; it's volunteer work. A group of us, including me and Naiy, will do all the packing, and then we ship it to those who order.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How do you ship it?

Naiy Keomisay: By our car.

Darling Thongphachan: It's very close. We pack on the weekend, and then we drive to them.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What interested you in doing this as volunteer work? I'm sure you have busy lives.



Naiy Keomisay: Our purpose is business, but we are also trying to give something back to the community. That's why it started with just Eric and us, one or two people, and then we asked our family to help. In Laos, we don't really have this. All the optical shops are expensive. For example, my parents in another province don't know that they can access eyeglasses at this price. If we walk into the optical shop, it will be pricey.

Darling Thongphachan: Over K1 million [LAK, Lao kip], which is about \$50.



Naiy Keomisay: Yes, and they will have to do the testing. With these glasses, we don't need to do the testing; we can buy them for our parents and our cousins, and just let them try.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How has it changed your parents' lives? What were the benefits for them?

Darling Thongphachan: They can see better at a cheaper price. Their children can buy it for them, and for their grandparents. Some people outside of the province are still reading or talking with their grandchildren. Once they have this, they can see clearly.

When we did the event in Luang Prabang, the elders came from the mountain. One of them never had glasses before, and she couldn't eat or see. She couldn't even see the money properly. She came to us as the very last person because she walked slowly. Then we let her try eyeglasses and asked her to look at the money and let us know if she could see the numbers.

Naiy Keomisay: She was crying. She said she hadn't seen for a really long time. It fulfills us, so that's why we do volunteer work.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How did people know you were at Luang Prabang?



Darling Thongphachan: Normally, we go to a school and the school announces the activity to the nearby village, in case anyone wants glasses.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: On a megaphone?

Darling Thongphachan: Yes.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: And who came?

Darling Thongphachan: Mostly older people because we target these glasses to the elderly who are long-sighted.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: It's really hard to get people to buy glasses. In the store downstairs, you sell maybe 10 or 15 pairs a month. It's not an easy product to move. But when people need it, they really like it, and it's really cheap. Why is it so hard to move?

Darling Thongphachan: Many people in Laos don't know that this type of glasses exists and that they can be worn instantly.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How do we change that? As you're selling them, is there anything you've seen that is helping with that?



Naiy Keomisay: We just explain to them that with the glasses they don't need to go to the optical shop. We can test and try the power. It's like going to the convenience store in Thailand or in any other country, where they can buy long-sighted glasses in the store.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How do you tell people that? How are you making people aware of that?



Darling Thongphachan: We don't have a marketing campaign or announcement or something like that. It's just mouth-to-mouth from people in the same community. Even Fred Hollows did their own case. They visit every province, or village hospital, and distribute throughout the village.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: My understanding is that the Fred Hollows model is great because they already have relationships with hospitals and the villages. They go to every single place. The things you're trying in the grocery stores, and in the store downstairs, that's where you get glasses where I am from, in New York. Do you feel like it's getting more common here or should you stop doing that?

Darling Thongphachan: We just started doing it. Our main focus is not through the stores but through organizations like Fred Hollows or big companies in Laos, like Maybank.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Can you tell me more about the Maybank partnership?

Naiy Keomisay: Yes. They bought glasses for a team building activity, for the corporate social responsibility (CSR). They give it to the people near the hospitals, the same approach as Fred Hollows. The elderly come and test.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How did you create that partnership with Maybank?



Naiy Keomisay: We have a friend there and we heard that they have a corporate social responsibility, and then we went there and presented that we want to sell these glasses.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Have you done that with other places, too?



Darling Thongphachan: Yes, we tried in garment factories.

Naiy Keomisay: People in a big factory might need the glasses because of the work they do. But they were not very interested in this.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What was the reason that they said they weren't interested? Is it because they already had another relationship?

Darling Thongphachan: No, they just don't see the benefit for the people.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Interesting. Going back to the stores, have you ever seen someone buy a pair of glasses? Can you tell me all the details about what the experience was like?

Naiy Keomisay: I experienced that before. One time, the wife was buying stuff. The husband was waiting for her. He walked around and saw the glasses at the counter. He asked if it was a US brand and how expensive it was. I asked him to try it on and asked about his power because he was already wearing glasses. I showed him, compared the quality, explained the brand, the color, and the quality of the products, and he liked it. He told his wife he wanted to buy it and his wife told him to go to the optical shop. But he wanted to buy it.

Darling Thongphachan: I haven't experienced it, but I got feedback from our friends who brought it to their parents, and they were surprised about the quality. It's easy to choose the glasses for them because some of them don't have time or are scared to go to the optician to do the eye test.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Fred Hollows and Maybank are based on relationships. Once you have that relationship, you're in, because you already have the audience. You're providing the inventory, and then they supply the audience. Whereas in stores, you have to create the demand.

In Eric's store, you put the glasses right at the counter, at the point of sale, so that people can see it. In the grocery store, it's in the middle of the store. There's a lot of different styles and people actually like how they look. What do you think would compel people to buy glasses in grocery stores and pharmacies?



Naiy Keomisay: We need PR or someone who gives them the information. We also didn't know the glasses are so easy to put on, many people still think they need to go to the optical store.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Some people have tried billboards, or social media campaigns, but the thing that works more than anything is megaphones, just letting people know it's there. Have you tried radio or social media campaigns?



Darling Thongphachan: Not really. We do have our Facebook page, but don't use it in terms of marketing. More in terms of knowledge sharing.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Have you ever talked about eyeglasses on the Facebook page?

Darling Thongphachan: Yes, we do have people coming in and asking for the price.

Naiy Keomisay: We do the wholesale and want people to come and buy. We suggest they go to a pharmacy and try it.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Your goal is not just trying to sell these 10 pairs, but you want to find a buyer with a deeper relationship for more inventory?

Darling Thongphachan: Yes, as we are doing it as volunteers, we don't have people to go to places.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Could you tell me about the presentation you did for Maybank and other places? What kind of information do you share? Is it about costs? About health?



Darling Thongphachan: We cover a lot about the background of VisionSpring, of the Foundation, and what we do and the benefits of eyeglasses for people. We explain our main focus, the age range, and the quality of the product.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How do you talk about the social benefits?

Darling Thongphachan: We have the information from VisionSpring in Southeast Asia; in Vietnam and Cambodia. We use that information and present it to them.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Do you talk about it in terms of health benefits, or do you talk about it in terms of wage benefits, that if they wear this, their income improves?

Naiy Keomisay: It's not related to health benefits. We suggest they go see a doctor if they have a problem with the eyes. If you don't have a problem, but you are a long-sighted elder, then we can help.

Naiy Keomisay: We've been using the VisionSpring video before and translated it into Lao language for people to understand and posted it on Facebook also.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: We're trying to understand how the private sector and the market sector can help scale this. If you were given funding right now, or somebody else was given funding, what would be your advice? What's your opinion about how to scale this through the private sector?



Darling Thongphachan: We still follow our model of going to big companies to collaborate with them. We ask about the community activity that they would like to do as a cooperation. They want to promote their companies, so they're adding these types of activities to their PR campaigns and spending a lot of money. People are more interested in these activities than if we do announcements through the radio or the news. The community campaigns directly reach the people.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Why is this product so hard to sell through radio?

Darling Thongphachan: I guess people don't realize that it's real.



Naiy Keomisay: We know that long-sighted glasses are for elderly people. Our country is youth-based. Not every person can be reached through social media, only the middle aged people and below. If we don't directly introduce it to the elderly, they won't know about it.

Older people don't know that we post it on Facebook. It's not easy to access in the countryside. There is limited access for elderly people on social media. That is our pain point here in Laos.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Do you have any ideas of what we could do? Some things you've done have worked. Some things you've done haven't worked. What else could you try?

Darling Thongphachan: I think [distributing glasses] through Fred Hollows or similar organizations, other NGOs who have funds to support the people of Laos.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: In a lot of countries, specifically in India, a lot of people use the glasses because of fishing, because of tea, and because of weaving and stitching. In Laos, do you feel that the people who use the glasses are helped with their work?

Darling Thongphachan: Yes. With the weaving, with knitting, and my mom wears them to look at the phone or to read.

Naiy Keomisay: For the countryside, they use it for gardening or farming.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Most people in Laos live in the countryside, right?

Darling Thongphachan: Yes. Only about 200,000 people live in the capital city.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What you are trying is a different model. A lot of it has to do with the fact that Eric has some good connections, and he knows a lot of people. How are you finding your connection with VisionSpring? Do you guys pay import tax? How is the supplier relationship?



Naiy Keomisay: Yes, we pay 10% VAT on the invoice to import it and 24% on the profit.

Naiy Keomisay: To charge from the buyer, from Fred Hollows. They buy the glasses from us and we charge them 10% VAT. The 24% is the VAT profit. I'm not sure about the accounting work, but, yes, we do have the import VAT to pay. We sell for \$2.50 and we bring it in for \$1.60, that is \$1 plus the logistics. It's a very low profit margin.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: You charge Fred Hollows \$2.60 a pair?

Darling Thongphachan: Yes.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Do you sell them for \$2.60 a pair in the store downstairs?



Darling Thongphachan: No. Downstairs is around \$3 or \$4. We have 100% inflation.



Naiy Keomisay: We may need to charge more due to the new order because the rate is higher in Laos kip (LAK).

Darling Thongphachan: We sell in Laos kip, but we buy in dollars.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Is that because of inflation or because of the American tariff policy?

Darling Thongphachan: I think both.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How often do they order and how many orders at a time?

Naiy Keomisay: Quarterly, about 3,000.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: That's a lot. You're not making very much off of each thing?

Darling Thongphachan: No, not very much. That's why we call it volunteer work.



Naiy Keomisay: We want people to get good quality eyeglasses for not a high price. It's ten times more expensive in an optical shop.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What's their price point?

Darling Thongphachan: It's ₭800,000 to over ₭1 million, like \$50.

Naiy Keomisay: With branding, it will be \$100.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Makes sense. The problem is, once you only sell it in those places, you change the entire market value and it becomes a luxury commodity rather than just something everybody can get.

Nice: You're right, yes.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How do you guys deal with screening downstairs? Do you tell people to screen on their phone, or to try them on?



Darling Thongphachan: Try them on. We don't do actual screening because we are not doctors. With this type of eyeglasses you can try them on, and if you see clearly or if it is too far, then you can change the power.

VisionSpring gave us a presentation and training on the distance to stand for test reading. People trust us easier if we tell them that we are trained.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Thank you. You've become the eyeglass women of Laos! That's awesome.

ICON LEGEND



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Money



Supply



Demand generation



Partnerships



Technology



Distribution channel



Regulation



Training



Media campaigns and marketing



Screening

Ambika Samarthya-Howard (she/her) is Solutions Journalism Network's Chief Innovation Officer. She strategizes on communications, metrics, impact, product and technology, leveraging platforms for the network and creating cool content. She also leads the Solutions Insights Lab, an initiative of SJN that uses targeted research and analysis to identify and interrogate what's working and what's not in a particular sector or field. She has an MFA from Columbia's film program and has been creating, teaching and writing at the intersection of storytelling and social good for two decades. She has produced content for Current TV, UNICEF, Havas, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and Prism.

** This interview has been edited and condensed.*