Evolving from meetups

Meetups, though popular, are time-consuming and do not let the small entrepreneur realise his full potential.

Meetups ecommerce: This term refers to the practice of a buyer meeting a seller, usually in a public place like a coffeeshop, to buy the product that he initially viewed online.

Filipinos are comfortable with meetups – they are just a fact of life to us, and they are one that we appreciate. We Filipinos are tactile shoppers. We like to feel and inspect what we are going to potentially buy. Shoes we might put on and walk around in. Clothes we might wear in a dressing room, or if none is available, try them on behind a curtain hung in the corner.

This is precisely why meetups are popular – they give us an opportunity to physically feel what we previously saw only online.

The concept of a meetup would be foreign to consumers in other countries. In the US, for example, even small businesses and micro enterprises can have delivery and fulfillment options through a variety of service providers. It is not cost-prohibitive to set up, nor is it difficult to do so.

**Running all over the metro**

The wide availability of these services in other countries stresses the fact that Philippine e-commerce needs to evolve. It is not fully digital yet and this is unfortunate, because meetups do not allow our entrepreneurs to fully realise the potential of their businesses.

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Meetups, by their nature, are not that efficient. A meetup calls for the buyer and seller to both take time out of their schedules to meet at a certain time and at a certain place, which given Philippine traffic and Filipino time, is always bound to take longer than you plan or like.

Even agreeing on a common time and place in the first place can be a headache in and as of itself. The seller must engage with the buyer in a long back-and-forth to settle upon the when and where, and this is just for one customer.

Organising informal meetups may require the seller to coordinate with several buyers over Instagram comments, others via Facebook private message, and still others through text message. This process – quite understandably – can get overwhelming.

The determined seller can reasonably do this for a few buyers, but meetups prevent the business from scaling. You can only make as many sales as you can be physically present for. On the flipside, you may continue to get inquiries for products long after you’ve exhausted your inventory for them, which is as frustrating for the buyer as it is for the seller.

Meetups, after all, do not have a customer-facing inventory display, so there is no concept of a first-come, first-serve queue. Meetups, thus, take away the efficiency that e-commerce is suppose to bring to your business.

This principle also applies to consumers. Shopping online is supposed to make your life easier, not have you running across the metro to meet this or that vendor. Meetups, for the online shopper, represent a continuation of the status quo, only instead of buying from brick-and-mortar stores, you’re doing it peer-to-peer.

**“A MacBook Pro case with nothing inside”**

While this may sound like fear-mongering, meetups are also dangerous. The fact that you’re meeting in a public place may give the illusion of security, but there really is none. The seller may not be so blatant as to rob the buyer at gunpoint, but by participating in meetups, the latter opens himself to all sort of scams.

The sealed box for a MacBook Pro may prove to have nothing inside it but a silver slab that approximates the weight of one. Or, if there is a MacBook Pro, it might be defective or broken and there is no system in place to protect the buyer. The seller may disappear, the line where he was previously so easy to reach may go dead.

Some scams are a little more mundane, yet no less malicious. One common one that I’ve heard multiple people experiencing, revolves around Recto. A seller will post product listings for hundreds of items on a given platform, none of which he actually owns or has. When an interested buyer inquires, the seller will set up a meetup near Recto.

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Around thirty minutes prior to the appointed time, the seller will simply buy the product from Recto. He will then sell the product at a markup – one worth all the trouble of arranging this scheme – to the buyer, who is none the wiser.

Some might argue that such deals are simply arbitrage, but this is price discrimination through and through. It is unethical to charge a higher price to a consumer for the same product that you bought at a lower one a few minutes earlier.

Meetups, then, are unsafe for their lack of security checks. By engaging in meetups, customers operate outside the protection of both brick-and-mortar stores as well as credible e-commerce platforms, leaving them with no recourse should they receive a poor quality product or fall victim to a scam.

**Going fully digital**

Because of the problems associated with meetups, consumers should look at other options for order fulfillment. Sellers, for their part, must also harness the platforms that can help them with delivery.

I understand that this transition will not be easy. Though this may sound strange, meetups are deeply ingrained into the culture of our digital economy. Filipinos are also concerned about the alternative of creating online stores with delivery and fulfillment options.

They worry that going fully online might be cost prohibitive, too technical, or even a waste of their time and resources. Of course, setting up a fully online shop is none of these things, and therein lies the truth of the matter.

Philippine e-commerce still relies heavily on meetups, not because of any lack of available technology – there are many solutions that consumers can choose from depending on their needs – but because there is a lack of education.

Filipino merchants do not understand how crucial it is to adopt full digitalisation, if not automation, beginning from the point of order and ending with the point of delivery.

Creating an online shop has numerous benefits, both for the buyer and seller. For one, the buyer has more payment options, such as credit card, cash on delivery, or over-the-counter payments. The flexibility means it is more convenient for them.

Online stores are also more convenient for sellers. Rather than have multiple channels of communication, they have a single clearinghouse from which to deal with the buyer. In addition, since online stores have built-in inventory systems, customers can only inquire for products that you actually have stock of. You will never frustrate a customer again with an ad for a product you no longer sell or have.

Because online stores require buyers to register and create an account, sellers have their online contact information. This makes it easier for businesses to remarket to them, especially for products that would be complementary to what they originally bought. Someone who bought a Macbook Pro, for example, might be remarketed with a newsletter promoting laptop covers or bags. Since this process can be automated, it makes it easier for businesses to scale.

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It is the responsibility of Filipino businesses who have made this change to educate their peers, and in some cases, even their competitors, on the incredible benefits that come with setting up an online store. Getting Filipinos to embrace e-commerce in its entirety, means we can collectively receive the convenience, efficiency and prosperity that it promises.

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