Spoons Kitchen Exchange

Community Partner: Marielle Saums

Team Members: Tishyaa Chaudhry, Sharon Ren, Helen Zheng

February 6, 2024

**Community Partner Background**

**About the Organization**

Spoons Kitchen Exchange is a resale shop that endeavors to provide sustainable and affordable resources for the kitchen. It was recently created, and based in Pittsburgh, though the shop is virtual, and spreads reach across the country. *The mission of Spoons is not only to provide affordable kitchenware, but to preach circular economy, sustainability, and being environmentally conscious among its community.* While Spoons is currently a small business, a goal for the organization is not only to accomplish its mission, but to serve as a community leader and provide resources for the community to practice sustainability.

Currently, the community that it serves is aspirational home cooks in Pittsburgh with limited resources and budgets. However, a goal of Spoons is to build its organizational network with other business owners in the retail and restaurant space, as well as the Pittsburgh start-up/incubator space.

**Programs**

Because Spoons is still relatively new, the major programs that Spoons utilizes is its online resale shop. Currently, the site resembles a typical retail shop. Spoons has other processes, however, that are more relevant to the back-end of the business - for example, with acquiring any goods to be sold. More specifically, these processes include gathering resources and goods through estate sales, thrift shops, and more. From there, Marielle (who is currently the sole staff on the organization) would take the goods back to their apartment to create and take photos to be uploaded to the site. Because Spoons is a sustainable business, this process pushes more towards a circular economy, in which items are reused and refurbished when needed, reducing waste and allowing for quality items to be back in use.

In terms of technology, Shopify is the main form used, as it houses the website, as well as inventory management (that is directly created within Shopify), connecting any sales to the storage numbers and status of the goods sold. This allows for efficient access and updates to storage, and reduces room for error.

**Staff**

At the organization, Marielle manages everything single-handedly, utilizing a Mac for their tasks. She oversees the Shopify page, drawing from past experience in website building, but she has limited expertise in HTML/CSS or programming. While she possesses a foundational understanding of relevant computer office applications, she may benefit from additional technologies for managing their inventory and taking product pictures. She currently takes pictures of their products on their Iphone and uploads them directly to their Shopify website. In addition to shopify she uses the following websites and technologies for managing their business:

1. Zoom for meeting with their potential clients/partners
2. Notion for project management
3. Google Docs and the google suite for managing information that is not stored on the website
4. Gmail is their primary source of communication

Marielle plans to add maybe 1-2 more part-time people in the future probably within inventory/pop-ups and for dealing with logistics.

**Information Management**

The critical information for the business is the product and customer information. Information about the products sold is done using Shopify but Marielle finds it daunting and confusing at times.The shopify app documentation is generally okay but it has limited tech support is offered depending on the company since Shopify has a market of independent app developers. Some of the current apps she is using have good online support and that was one of the primary reasons she chose to use those for their website.

Managing all electronically across mobile and laptop devices presents a challenge for cash flow management, particularly during pop-up events and inventory sourcing runs. The frustration is compounded by Shopify's subpar phone app and expensive POS system, costing around $300. Occasionally, items are sold without being logged into the inventory system just to expedite sales during events.

**Community Project Partner Opportunity**

**Project Opportunity**

Because Spoons is new, the current customer base is small, with many customers being from word of mouth, and others being from search engine optimization (in which a customer searches for an item and ends up on the Spoons website). However, the greater goal of Spoons is to be able to impact the larger Pittsburgh community (and potentially more in the United States). Marielle has expressed the mission of Spoons being to not only practice circular economy, but to be able to serve everyone despite differences in age, belief, etc. Our current priority, after conversations with them, is to enhance the website through ensuring design accessibility guidelines are met, and that the site reflects more traditional kitchenware websites (without losing the core focus and values of Spoons).

A big problem that occurs with retail websites is often the confusion and frustration that turns customers away. In creating an accessibility-friendly website, people of all different upbringings and backgrounds can peruse the site without frustration and can lead into becoming a long-time customer. However, one thing to keep in mind is that simply re-designing parts of the website will not immediately result in a bigger customer base - other actions should be taken in company with the redesign in order to move towards that goal. Some suggestions here might be to increase local outreach via social media, news, etc. depending on the customer base.

Another problem revolves around the inefficiencies and limitations faced by Marielle in managing their Shopify website using their iPhone. They struggle with uploading pictures, editing product descriptions, and updating stock levels, particularly during pop-up events when sales are high.They also have found bugs in the Shopify app and there is limited customer support. As the business grows and inventory increases, these challenges will become more pronounced, leading to potential errors, customer dissatisfaction, and missed opportunities for sales. Solving these issues is critical for maximizing sales potential, improving customer experience, and maintaining competitiveness in the market. Having better and longer product descriptions will also enhance Search Engine Optimization and lead to better reach of the business. The time saved by having a better process to upload information can be used in connecting with the customer base and growing the circular ecosystem in Pittsburgh, which is one of the main missions of Spoons.

**Proposed Project Vision**

One of the primary goals of our project is to redesign and upgrade Spoons Kitchen Exchange's shopping website platform built with Shopify. Another goal is to help our client to improve the efficiency of product entry. Based on the client's request, we are placing a higher priority on redesigning their website's interface. By improving the existing user interface, we aim to provide a smoother and more streamlined experience for both buyers and sellers using the website. Regarding specific requirements, our client suggested that the website categories and layout could be designed with reference to other popular kitchenware website platforms. They preferred a simple overall UX and requested that our design should follow the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines. In addition to this, they wanted a form or similar feature on the website to connect with users. They also want us to prepare for different product templates, for example, tableware versus appliances, so that they could apply the templates based on their need in the future. Overall, these initiatives were designed to meet and enhance the user experience for people of all backgrounds who want to buy and sell cookware on the website, and to support Spoons Kitchen Exchange's mission of promoting the exchange of quality cookware within the Pittsburgh community.

After successfully redesign the website, we aim to build a custom Shopify app using an existing template on Github(<https://github.com/Shopify/shopify-app-template-ruby#>). The app would be built using Ruby, which would automatically upload product images and basic information of the product by calling Shopify’s API after the client adds images to the app. Based on client’s demand, we intend to include GPT’s API in the app, so that it could generate some generic product descriptions based on the images uploaded, helping the client to reduce time with the labeling process. Since building a custom app is a minor goal, we haven’t discussed the more specific details regarding the app with the client in depth yet. Therefore, the actual implementation and the functionality of this app would be subject to change. We envision this app would help the client to save time with the product upload process so that the client could spend more time on marketing and connecting with the customer.

The project has a wide range of stakeholders and users, including the owner of Spoons, who is currently managing inventory by themselves. Buys and sellers of cookware, as well as web browsers (potential buyers and sellers), are counted as the major stakeholders. Local businesses, community members interested in sustainable living, and potential IT contractors for future developments are also considered as key stakeholders.

We performed research on alternative solutions for redesigning the website. Some possible solutions include a complete redevelopment of the website, or use of other online website building templates, but they are deemed less viable due to integration complexities, cost implications and potential disruption to current operations. In terms of the alternatives of building a custom Shopify app, since the need of a supporting app for the product upload process is a more personal demand, we haven’t found any existing replacement for this app online yet. Although Shopify supports hiring a Shopify Partner to help you build a custom app, this would be exactly what we are doing – creating the app from scratch – so we do not consider it as a viable solution.

**User Stories**

1. As a college student getting ready to graduate, I want to be able to sell or give away my appliances so that I can reduce the amount of waste from goods that are still usable.
2. As a seller, I want to be able to easily find a way to sell my kitchenware so that I can focus on other hobbies/interests without worrying about where my items are going.
3. As a buyer, I want to view detailed product information and quality images so that I can make informed decisions with confidence in the kitchenware's condition.
4. As the owner of Spoons, I want to have a labor-saving process for inventory intake and management so that I can efficiently accept and list new items, maximizing productivity and focusing on growth activities.
5. As a Pittsburgh community member, I want to buy and sell kitchenware through a local platform so that I can minimize shipping times and make my life easier.