

A portrait of a man with dark hair and glasses, wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and light blue tie. He is standing in front of a stone wall. A yellow circular graphic with a quote symbol is positioned over his chest.

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If you have identified the preferences and needs of the consumer correctly, then there will be no stopping you to achieve your goals.

LUQMAN AFZAL



Luqman Afzal is a LUMS graduate from the BSc class of 2002. He graduated with a major in Economics and minor in Social Sciences. During his time at LUMS, his entrepreneurial spirit was nurtured and to date he has continued to cultivate his zest for entrepreneurship. He is the founder and CEO of The Monal Restaurant in Islamabad which has become an iconic tourist attraction. In this exclusive interview he talks about his journey, from managing a student convenience store at LUMS to establishing a fastest growing fine dining restaurant in Pakistan. As a result, he became the first Pakistani to be awarded a Pride of Performance award for 'entrepreneurship' in 2019.

You may think that the success of established companies is the most vital factor in the economic development. However, you should not underestimate the importance of entrepreneurs in the economic growth. They start up fast-growing businesses that create around twice as many jobs as established companies. Luqman Ali Afzal is one of those entrepreneurs in Pakistan who created more than 3000 jobs in a very short span of time. His first entrepreneurial venture launched almost two decades ago when he borrowed money from his father to buy the shares of LUMS Khoka (student convenience store) and scaled it up to one of the fastest growing restaurant brands in Pakistan - **The Monal**.

As the popular saying goes, "Food brings people together on many different levels. It's the nourishment of the soul and body." How well you contribute to the nourishment is the whole essence of it.

According to a private media in 2015, Luqman Afzal said, "It still seems like yesterday, though it has been 14 years, when I asked my father for money to buy the LUMS Khokha Inc shares. Buying shares of this facility and operating it for 18 months provided me with my first practical exposure to the real world of business, very early in life." In June 2005, Luqman decided to bid for a project in Islamabad which ultimately changed the course of his life.

Entrepreneurship is not just about famous faces though; here is the entrepreneurial success story that has not hit the headlines yet but is no less impressive as a result.

LUQMAN AFZAL: BEATING THE ODDS

By Usman Ahmed



“ I have always preached that listening to your customer and doing exactly in accordance with the demands of the customer should be the most important job for a business owner. As such, I kept my eyes & ears wide open for “customer feedback”.

This story belongs to an entrepreneur, an influencer, a teacher and most importantly a Pakistani.

It was fall of 2000, when a young undergraduate from Lahore started his entrepreneurial journey by acquiring the maximum number of shares of a student-run convenience store in LUMS. At that point, he was an amateur but was willing to learn anything and everything about the business. So, he ran the venture for the next 1.5 years and in the process gleaned hands-on knowledge and laid a foundation for a great story. Little did he know, he would

be changing the course of the Pakistani restaurant industry – and soon would be celebrated as one of the few modern honored and homegrown entrepreneurs of the country.

The founder of MONAL tells his stellar tale of success, shrewdness and finesse...

It was the end of my second year of B.Sc. in LUMS, when I acquired that much sought-after student run convenience store – aided by an angel investor – my father. The inspiration was to have an on-ground experience of

entrepreneurship and credit goes to my university for providing such an opportunity. It was my first venture and till date, whatever I have learnt, the credit goes to the “Khokha Inc.” The main USP of the store was to provide variety of food items tailored to the need of the students. I grabbed the opportunity to learn several lessons for life and I applied them wherever I went and now I am running a chain of restaurants in Pakistan. The foundation of my success rests in the lessons I learnt through that time of pure grunt work. My first lesson: **“Understand consumer behavior and harness customer preferences”**. Today, MNCs are spending billions of dollars to understand the consumer preferences and monitor their attitudes towards products and services. This essential tool, I learnt long time back when I used to go out with my friends and actively identified the motivations for selecting a particular brand or a product. This purposeful observation of those value generating motivations, I used to replicate in the store. I provided the best products out there in the market along with the concept of customization. This gave the customers liberty to design their own burgers and customize their own shakes! Me and my team always believed that the customer was the center point to success. Bottom-line: if you have identified the preferen-

ces and needs of the consumer correctly, then there will be no stopping you to achieve your goals.

I charged my consumers with a margin of not more than 15% with a promise of fresh products. Next thing, customers were flowing! Keeping the principle of **“Good Quality at a reasonable price”** upheld, after 2 years when I sold that store, its goodwill had increased by five times. This principle, in my opinion, is the best marketing concept out there because nobody wants to pay more than the value that they are perceiving. Be it convenience, quality or cost-effectiveness – it is all in the perception held by the customer. The model where we provided guaranteed fresh food from the hottest brands in the local markets at the convenience of purchase from within the campus kept the customers rolling in. A little higher price was perceived as value equated with convenience – the core purpose of the store! This lesson I have replicated at the Asian Wok. There, you will be served with bottomless mint margaritas followed by complementary crackers and then at the end of the meal a cup of fresh green tea – all on the house within the price of the meal. Thus, the perception created when you offer, you offer something extra to delight the customer, you exceed the value in the mind of the customer. This automatically

creates a word of mouth – the best advertising tool there is!

I have always preached that listening to your customer and doing exactly in accordance with the demands of the customer should be the most important job for a business owner. As such, I kept my eyes and ears wide open for “**customer feedback**”. Like any university, we at LUMS had our roll numbers as our email addresses. I was always available for the students on the email constantly even if I could not be reached on my phone. They shared constant feedback about hygiene, quality and service of the store; this helped me to improve a lot. Expanding on this very concept, now we have a formal program of ‘Mystery Shopper Program’. There are more than 800 families registered in this program. It helps us to receive the first-hand feedback from our respondents to enhance the quality of the products and services.

Tides have changed and now I am teaching where I learned it all. At LUMS in a course that I am teaching, I always tell my students about what I call the “**6 months back-up plan**”. It is very important to note that businesses do not bring money right away as soon as you are done with the inaugural ceremony. It takes time to establish a good name in the market. So, if someone is starting a new business then they need to be mindful of having a working capital of at least six months to meet any kind of the unforeseen circumstances. It is a cluttered world and to cut through all that key is to be focused on the strengths and “**keep it simple as much as you can**”. We can see it

happening in the Islamabad eatery scene. Today, people are coming up with unique selling ideas to sell their products and offering only specialties at reasonable prices. People are realizing that it will save them money, big kitchens, huge teams along with other logistics and supply chain dramas if they remain minimalistic and focus on the

and solely focus on providing the best experience to the consumers.

Business Excellence is an ongoing process and consistency is the key to grow. One very important thing for all the new entrants in the food service market is to “never indulge in any controversial or anti-health activity”. It is not advisable to gauge succe-

provides meals to various schools. Its essential to share what we gain from the society with the masses who are far less fortunate.

To conclude, the last thought that I would like to share is that research is very important before starting any type of business. Aspiring individuals must know the rules and laws, Government



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strengths. I have always supported developing in-house leaders rather than bringing somebody out of the company and super-imposing them on the team. I had a team of 4 people in LUMS and today these guys are the General Managers in my company. One of them was a dishwasher and now, he is heading a team of 450 individuals. As there is a saying that you keep your employees happy and they will take care of your customers. So, “**financial growth of the team**” is very important for the business to sustain properly. They will not be satisfied unless and until they feel comfortable with their financial growth when the business is booming, let it be monetary or in any form of any other benefit.

“**Department Segmentation**” should be clear and responsibilities should be mutually exclusive. Specifically, in the restaurant industry, operations department holds the main responsibility to serve the customers as they are directly involved with them. So, they should not be worried about any other responsibility of the business

ss with money because at the end of the day if you have a lot of money and not a single drop of peace then what is the good in it?

My main motivation behind my work is not money but the 3000 families who are getting their livelihood from the business. It gives me great happiness when I add some value to the customers’ experience on their special days and occasions. It satisfies me when I see my people developing and growing. The pinnacle of success is that my staff takes pride in being part of **MONAL**.

The last lesson that I would like to share is the most important “**Give back to the society**”. We are planning to open a charity hospitality school. It will function as a full-fledged boarding school including both meals and accommodation – we will accommodate 100-150 students in the first phase. The main aim is on capacity building through coursework as well as practical training. I do not advertise it but we have a fixed percentage of sales that goes to a charity hospital that we run back in our village. We are also running a foundation that

departments and other stakeholders that are involved. Knowing as much as possible is key to a stable beginning.

In these times, it is not just about the food. It is a whole experience that we are selling. So, it is a set of services including every touch-point where a consumer will experience your business and its offering – so being in the food business is so much more than just the plate that comes in front of the customer.

On Team Building

The company presently employs 3000 people, which I consider my biggest achievement. The most interesting fact is that the Monal Lahore’s team is being headed by the same person who used to warm pizza slices, and Islamabad’s team is being headed by the person who used to be the cashier at the Khokha at LUMS. I am proud to have groomed people to hold higher positions.



Lighter Side..

My favourite quote is:

"We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then is not an act, but a habit" *Aristotle*

My favourite movie is:

The Game

I am energized by:

Spreading knowledge and skills keep me motivated.

I recommend reading:

"The Prince" by *Machiavelli*

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IN MY HEARTS OF HEARTS, I DON'T CONSIDER THIS PRIDE OF PERFORMANCE AWARD MY OWN. THIS IT IS MEANT FOR MY PARENTS. SPECIALLY, FOR MY FATHER AND MY TEACHERS. IT IS FOR THEM. MINE WOULD BE WHEN MY KIDS WILL COME TO ME WITH SOMETHING THAT I CAN BE PROUD OF. THAT WILL BE MY '**PRIDE OF PERFORMANCE**'.

6 Months Formula

Tides have changed and now I am teaching where I learned it all. At LUMS in a course that I am teaching, I always tell my students about what I call the "6 months back-up plan". It is very important to note that businesses do not bring money right away as soon as you are done with the inaugu-ral ceremony. It takes time to establish a good name in the market. So, if someone is starting a new business then they need to be mindful of having a working capital of at least six months to meet any kind of the unforeseen circumstances.

Entrepreneurs are frequently thought of as national assets to be cultivated, motivated, and remunerated to the greatest possible extent. Great entrepreneurs have the ability to take risks and change the way we live and work. An entrepreneur is an individual who sets up and grows a business. A child who sells lemonade in front of his house for a profit is an entrepreneur just like a wealthy businessman who decides to invest millions into a new venture or a small startup company. Entrepreneurs also affect the economy positively by inspiring others to achieve.

In tough economic times, entrepreneurship and innovation are more important than ever as companies and businesses continue to battle in an ever-

crowded market place. It is encouraging to see Government of Pakistan added 'entrepreneurship' category in its highest civil awards, 'Pride of Performance' that honors and celebrates the annual achievements of successful entrepreneurs of Pakistan.

At Startup Insider magazine, our team members work with many young, dynamic and growing businesses and sponsoring these success stories is our way of showing support for the entrepreneurs who push their businesses through adversity to succeed.

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