

From Campus to the Village

What started as class projects in US universities are now scalable tech innovations in rural India.

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To take an idea from the drawing board—or, from the blackboard—to the market takes some doing. To take an idea from the classrooms of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Stanford and Virginia University and to turn them into ideas that work commercially in rural India is even more extraordinary. That's what a bunch of entrepreneurs is attempting to do with projects that range from rural electrification to solar-powered refrigeration systems. The entrepreneurs have the fire in the belly required to make these ventures viable. That, coupled with the quality of the ideas themselves—all of which have bagged awards at university competitions—ensures that investors aren't reluctant to back these immensely scalable ventures. Here's a look at how these whiz-kids are creating scalable high-tech business models that promise to improve the quality of lives in rural India in affordable ways.



United Villages of Hasson

Retailers deep in rural Rajasthan can now order for products with an SMS and be assured of delivery in 36 hours.

A retailer in a village typically makes two trips a month to the nearest town to replenish his stock—close to 60 per cent of his goods are procured from outside the village. And therein hangs a business model and an opportunity that Amir Alexander Hasson spotted. It's a huge opportunity all right, what with India's rural population at 660 million at last count, and the number of villages at 6,40,000. The fast moving consumer

goods (FMCG) companies tap only the larger villages with a population of over 5,000 (around 15,000 villages), or just 2 per cent of all villages, with their traditional distribution networks. It's the untapped, smaller villages with a population of between 2,000 and 5,000—which are the “pain” points for FMCG marketers—that Hasson is targeting with the company he founded in 2006-07, United Villages (UV). Hasson reckons that UV can po-

tentially service some 70,000 villages.

So what has UV done? In a line, it has developed a scalable, cost-effective, mobile-enabled supply chain for village retailers. It procures goods that include essentials like soap and toothpaste and also bigger-ticket items like phones and watches from the large corporations and delivers to the village retailers at their doorstep through a unique supply chain mechanism. “It's simple M-commerce over SMS. The re-



Redefining rural retail: Hasson (in Maruti Omni) wants his online retail vision to encompass all villages in Rajasthan

tailer's mobile is loaded with an application that allows him to get in touch with UV's sales-support executives and order," says Hasson, Founder & CEO of UV. Retailers can also browse through UV's E-Shop (an online shop from which he can select and order). The goods are delivered at the retailer's doorstep within 36 hours, adds Hasson.

UV is currently present in 60 villages in Rajasthan and has signed up 500 village retailers. Each of these retailers procures inventory worth Rs 3,000-5000 from UV every month. UV has meantime gone a step ahead and launched two of its own products—a washing soap and a dishwasher, both under the UV brand name. In the next two years, Hasson hopes to cover 12,000-odd villages out of the 40,000 in Rajasthan, after which he will move to another state. ©

▲ United Villages Inc. and United Villages India

FOUNDER: Amir Alexander Hasson

PROJECT IDEA: Initial idea was to provide Wi-Fi services from kiosks in remote rural areas. Project now re-modelled as a mobile-enabled supply chain mechanism.

UNIVERSITY: MIT

AWARD: The idea made it to the semi-finals of the MIT \$50K entrepreneurship competition.

FUNDING: Raised \$3.5 million in venture funding from institutions and angel investors. Looking to raise \$2 million for expansion.

FUTURE PLANS: To expand through rural Rajasthan and be present in 3-4 states in next three years.