

COVID-19 Case Study

Rallying support for local small businesses

Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) contribute over 18 per cent of Fiji's GDP and employ approximately 60 per cent of the labour force. While all sectors slowed down due to the pandemic, the impact was particularly heavy on MSMEs dependent on tourism and international visitors. MDF's research shows that cashflow was a key challenge.

MDF used its in-country presence, capacity for analysis and strong networks to support MSMEs to innovate and adapt to the challenges brought about by COVID-19.

On 2 January 2020, Felisha Tuiloma opened the doors to her new restaurant, The Rotisserie, on the outskirts of Fiji's capital, Suva. The opening was cause for celebration, as for many years Felisha and her husband had dreamed of starting their own business. Despite a good start, just over two months later, Fiji recorded its first case of COVID-19. In early April, Suva went into a two-week lockdown and business took a turn for the worse.

"There was a bit of a spike in business at first because a lot of people were after deliveries, but then we saw a drop. We were at 50 percent," explained Felisha. "We knew we had to get creative because we had just opened – there was no way that we were going to close! We had to change our menu, we needed to look at our costs, we needed to look at our pricing and the way we did things. Quitting was not an option," she added.

Another local businesswoman, Sera Ranadi, who has operated a popular seafood stall in the bustling Nausori market since 2017, shared similar sentiments: "Before COVID-19, it was smooth. People would visit my stall and I would earn around USD200 (AUD216) during the week. After COVID-19 hit us, it went down to USD100 (AUD130). It was hard and I had to adjust."

#SupportLocalBusiness

MDF Fiji has been working in MSME development since 2017. Thanks to this experience, the team was able to immediately tune into the challenges faced by the segment at the onset of the pandemic. MDF partnered with the Ministry of Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport (MCTTT), a key high-level market actor, to run a national social media campaign under the Ministry's 'Fijian Made – Buy Fijian' initiative. The communications strategy used the hashtag #SupportLocalBusiness and aimed to increase awareness of local MSMEs and encourage consumers to take advantage of new business promotions.

To kickstart the campaign, MCTTT and MDF engaged eight prominent Fijian social media influencers. To assist the influencers, the MDF team built a comprehensive database of local MSMEs that included a description of products, services and offers that could appeal to different audiences. The campaign was launched in June 2020 and ran for eight weeks, with the influencers featuring over 100 small businesses, their products and contact details. Several local entrepreneurs reported an increase in the number of people following them on social media, visiting their premises and buying their products.

Communities for small businesses

Felisha shared that the campaign provided publicity for her new restaurant and reached new audiences. She said, “[Social media influencers] Apakuki and Mario already have their followers. When they promoted us, we saw instant results! We had people coming in the next day, saying, ‘Oh, we saw your post on Mario’s Facebook or Apakuki’s video.’ So, it was really good because there were a lot of people who still hadn’t heard about our business.”

Since the promotion of Sera’s market stall on Facebook, she has had many new customers and increased her sales, especially on weekends. She said, “One of the past Saturdays, two gentlemen came asking for me in the market... they shared that they came all the way from Suva to find me and buy my seafood! They said ‘Andhy Blake has been posting your stuff on Facebook.’ Since I met Andhy, he has changed my business.”

Community support has been overwhelming. Demand for products, such as Sera’s ready-made seafood packs, rose significantly. A number of the advertised businesses have capitalised on this momentum by developing their own social media profiles.



Fiji records **1.24 million** mobile connections and close to **586,000** internet users, of whom **560,000** are active on social media.

Promoting influencer marketing in Fiji

The campaign has had a ripple effect. Nadi Eats has continued to promote MSMEs and influencer Andhy Blake, a professional television producer, went on to create a show that profiled small businesses around the country. “I got the idea from when I started doing the influencing work with MDF. I presented the idea to the Mai TV Content Director and he encouraged me to do it. So, we refined the concept and then created the show,” explained Andhy. Mai Fijian Voices premiered in October 2020. Halfway through the season, the show secured a sponsorship from the British High Commission and the response has been very positive. Andhy will continue to support efforts to rebuild Fiji’s economy post-COVID-19.

Social media influencer engagement is a highly viable business opportunity for both the influencer and the client. In Fiji, where social media is widely used, MDF has played a crucial role in starting the influencer marketing trend, ensuring both influencers and MSMEs benefit.

Without government support, it would be difficult for MSMEs to successfully navigate a crisis like the pandemic. As the ministry responsible for local small business, MCTTT has championed MSMEs over the years and highlighted their contribution to Fiji’s economy through the ‘Fijian Made – Buy Fijian’ campaign. For MDF, MCTTT was a key partner in providing credibility and visibility for the Support Local Business campaign. The ministry led the campaign to leverage national recognition and support to help businesses stay open and keep people employed during the crisis. MCTTT Communications Coordinator Natalyn Lakhan said, “We are delighted to work with MDF to assist MSMEs during this COVID-19 pandemic and be a driver for this positive moment. Given that our ‘Fijian Made’ campaign has so much traction already, the combination of the two campaigns will be perfect.”

The Support Local Business campaign is proof that new business models can be used in times of crisis to transform the lives of entrepreneurs, as well as their suppliers.



Impact of #SupportLocalBusiness



137 MSMEs were promoted, of which **60%** were women-led businesses.



Of the MSMEs featured, **80%** reported an average 15% increase in sales revenue through the promotion.