



Business Assistance Facility BAF II



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Trade
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Ministry of Industry and Commerce-Lao PDR

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Meet the team: Mr Athith

Mr. Athith Pathoumvanh recently joined the BAF II team, to support us in our marketing and outreach efforts over the next few months. He has been a consultant for the ITC and MSME Clinic projects, here in Laos, and is the founder of iCAAN marketing agency. We asked Mr Athith a few questions.

In your view, what have been some of the most attractive marketing campaigns by Lao companies that you have seen during the pandemic?

“The pandemic is a time for companies to plan ahead, and develop themselves to be ready for the post-pandemic ‘new normal’. We have already seen a number of brands conduct refreshingly new and attractive marketing strategies. But we are also seeing firms experiment with new kinds of business models. For example, one small Lao specialty rice producer company has combined its marketing and sales activation into ‘LIVE Shopping’, using the Facebook platform. This helps the brand to increase both its numbers of engagement and sales at the same time, rather than focusing on the traditional sales channel alone.

We are also seeing greater activity in P2C (producer to consumer), with more firms leveraging social media, apps and other technology to sell straight to customers, and bypassing distribution and retail firms. The latter are having to raise their game in terms of what they can offer producers, in return for their sales commission, all of which ultimately benefits consumers. These are exciting times !”

Do you think social media is now as important as traditional media for marketing purposes?

“I think social media now is very important, or even more important, than traditional media for marketing, especially in the Laos market. The number of users still increases every year, particularly on Facebook. It not only provides essential marketing tools, but Facebook is a platform that helps connect brands with precisely the right target audience. This is something that advertisements in newspapers or billboards, for example, could never do. As a result, the marketing budgets of companies can be spent more efficiently and cleverly.”

If you were advising a company that was planning to do some marketing for the first time, what would be the three key pieces of advice you would give them?

The answer is pretty simple. New companies need to: 1) clearly identify their brand and business objective; 2) understand their target audience; and then 3) prepare and execute their marketing activities using the most effective channels.

BAF II progress up-date

As we happily wave goodbye to 2021, and (cautiously) welcome in 2022, the BAF II team can report on recent progress.

As of mid-January, the BAF II project had signed just under 240 matching grant contracts, equivalent to a little under US\$1.3m in funds. Of these, over 145 matching grants have been disbursed, amounting to over US\$830,000.

Although BAF II had originally been scheduled to close in April 2022, we now anticipate that it will run for an additional two years, to April 2024, in line with the other components of the Lao Competitiveness and Trade umbrella project, run by the Ministry of Industry & Commerce. And while the original intention had been to disburse 300 grants during the lifetime of BAF II, that target has now been increased to 500 grants.

In addition to BAF II’s matching grants, our team conducts free, one-on-one business advisory to any firm that asks for it. If that interests you, then just register on our website (www.baflaos.com) and we can begin a dialogue. Over 950 companies have already registered on our website, and we have over 2,000 followers of our Facebook page – if you have not already seen it, check it out !

So what lies ahead for BAF II ? In 2022, we aim to increase our service offerings outside of Vientiane Capital. Much will depend on whether we see the end of the pandemic, and the various precautionary measures taken to limit its spread. But if some kind of normality does return to business in 2022, then BAF II wants to play a supportive role in helping firms get back to growing.

As companies shift their defensive strategies of 2020-21 towards more attacking strategies in 2022+, BAF II will be here to help them do so. The post-pandemic business environment is likely to be quite different from the one before 2020, as the needs and priorities of customers and clients have evolved, and been changed by the strange experience we have all undergone. That presents growth opportunities for companies willing to seize this chance.

Creating a website for your business: Some suggestions

The need for most companies, however small, to have a website is becoming increasingly important. Whether it serves as a very basic 'shop front', or actually allows customers to conduct transactions on it, the website is an important representation of your business. So, how does one go about creating a good website? Service providers will offer to make a website for you, and depending on how good you want it to look, and/or how advanced you want it to be, it can potentially cost quite a lot of money. And even when it is completed, the website needs to be managed and kept up to date.

There is no ideal website. All websites are different because they are aiming to do different things, represent companies in different areas of business, have varying budgets, offer a different ranges of services ('functionality') on the website, or are trying to attract different kinds of visitors ... and so on.

Nonetheless, BAF II recommends that if your company is thinking of creating a website for the first time, or doing a major refresh of an existing website, that you consider the following issues:

- Set a budget for the website's creation, and for maintaining it over time. There is nothing more frustrating for a customer to go to a website and find that it is not working properly. If you cannot afford a website just yet, what about creating a Facebook page?
- If that budget is big enough to hire a website designer, then conduct a competitive selection process to get the best deal, both in terms of price, and the quality and quantity of work. If the budget means that you cannot afford a website designer, then there is software available that will allow you to create your own, but this will probably take more time to achieve the desired result.
- Decide on your main aims and priorities for the website, precisely, and make sure they can be fulfilled. For example, if you want customers to be able to place orders on the website, and pay for goods or services, then you will need to think about the functions necessary to make this happen.
- Check out the websites of your competitors, and evaluate what they do that is good, and what they do that is bad. How can your company website be better? Review some of the websites – in any sector – that you personally like most, and consider what it is about them that attracts you. Put yourself in the shoes of a random visitor to your website, and try to ensure that it is accessible and attractive to someone who knows nothing about your company. Take absolutely nothing for granted.

- Avoid the trap of thinking about the website as some kind of optional, 'add on' that promotes your business. Business is increasingly being conducted using the internet, and the company website should be regarded as a core part of your business model. If you have a marketing strategy, using social media, conventional media or other activities, make sure that the website is an integral part of that strategy. It is important that customers and clients see a coherent and consistent image of your business.
- Don't forget about the 'back end' of the website, and how it will be managed, either by you or a third party service provider. If the website allows customers to submit orders, or has a shopping cart function, this is connected to the company's internal operational systems, to improve efficiency, and avoid duplication of effort. You generally don't think of a company shop front as being detached from the rest of the business, and the same applies to websites.



- One area where website creators can be particularly helpful is in trying to ensure that the website attracts visitor traffic, using various methods. You certainly do not want to spend money on a website that is then visited by no one except you.
- Which languages do you want on the website, if any, apart from Lao? Do you want to have an FAQs section, or a 'live chat' function on the website, or an 'email entry' function that allows visitors to leave their contact details? Do you want to embed some short videos? Do you want a button that allows visitors to submit email messages? Do you want a button that links to your company's Facebook page or other social media platforms?
- What is your target audience, and what will attract them to your company website? This can affect the look of the website, and even its design. For example, if most customers will look at your company website using a hand-held device, like a smartphone, then the website needs to look attractive, and be easy to navigate, even when not viewed on an office computer screen.

- The best website designs tend to look clean, clear and modern, and are easy to navigate. Even if there is a lot of complexity within the website (eg. the ability to buy on-line), it needs to feel 'user friendly' and reliable. Good photos, images and graphics are important, if you want to look professional. Think about a colour scheme, and avoid having too many different fonts.
- A balance needs to be struck between creating a website that looks fresh and unique, and a website that still conforms to some of the basic requirements that visitors expect to see, such as a homepage, a profile of the company, contact information, etc. Try to get that balance right. Avoid the temptation to put too much irrelevant information on the website; there should be a clear justification behind every word and picture. Less is more.
- Finally, all company websites are 'works in progress', and need to be refined and refreshed over time, based on suggestions and feedback provided, as well as changes in the products or services being offered by your company, as well as other factors. Keep the website fresh, if you can, so that you attract repeat visitors.



Have any questions about the above, or other matters relating to company websites, marketing and branding? Please contact the BAF II team for a meeting, and we will do our best to help.

Remind me: How does BAF II work ?

As the manager or owner of a business, you know your company better than anyone else. You know its strengths and its weaknesses, and you may have a good idea about where the greatest threats and opportunities lie.

But sometimes it can be difficult to develop a clear strategy for building on the strengths and seizing the opportunities, as well as reducing the weaknesses and mitigating the threats. Sometimes it is useful to get some expert assistance on how to prioritize your efforts in the most strategic way. This is where the BAF II's business advisors can be of help, as a free service offering.

Having conducted a thorough analysis of your company, you may decide that you need outside ('third party') technical assistance to make changes that will help strengthen and grow your business. These may relate to production and operations, or marketing and sales, or some other field where you need to make improvements.

But finding these kinds of business development services (BDS) can sometimes be tricky, and their services are rarely free (particularly if they are good).

This is where BAF II comes in. Our team of business advisors can help guide you towards the right BDS expert. And if your company decides to retain the services of a BDS provider to help you grow your business, then you can apply for a matching grant from BAF II to cover 50% of those costs.

All we want in return is to see your business grow.

Contact us

If you want to learn more about BAF II, please visit our website at: www.baflaos.com. You can also email us at: info@baflaos.com. Or call us at: 020 55542658. Our office is located in the Lao National Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Vientiane. Feel free to pop in for a chat.

Interested to learn more? Just register on our website (www.baflaos.com) for free, and with no obligation.

BAF II is one of four components of the Lao Competitiveness and Trade (LCT) Project, co-funded by the World Bank Group, DFAT, Irish Aid and USAID, and executed by the Department of Planning and Cooperation, Ministry of Industry and Commerce. BAF II's specific objective is to support private sector companies of all sizes, and across all parts of Laos, to build their skills and expertise so that they can become locally, regionally and internationally more competitive, and thereby grow.