

Unnati: Sustaining Value in the Agricultural Sector of Rural India

Unnatiⁱ — an integrated agricultural service provider in Uttar Pradesh, India — had been helping farmers located in difficult-to-reach hinterlands improve their agricultural productivity. But Unnati needed support to sustain value for its stakeholders. By partnering with enterprises to create, execute, and improve farmer and retailer engagement, Unnati — the brainchild of Amit Sinha and Ashok Prasad — had been informing farmers of the right product uses to yield optimal outputs. Powered by farmer knowledge and supported financially and technologically through mobile communications platforms from its parent company, Akshamaala Solutions Pvt. Ltd., Unnati was driven by a force of skilled multi-lingual contact center personnel and trained field staff. Akshamaala was founded in 2010, and Unnati in 2011. Growing from a nine-person unit to 46 employees by the end of May 2014, Unnati encompassed a consumer base of 4,500 farmers and a cumulative land-holding of more than 10,000 acres. However, a sense of uncertainty worried Sinha and Prasad. Soon they would have a difficult choice to make: They could either expand Unnati's consumer base across new markets, or they could penetrate deeper into their current consumer base of farmers, by providing new services or enhancing existing ones. It was not just this sense of uncertainty that concerned them; there was another source of apprehension. Akshamaala's stable revenue model allowed them to experiment with Unnati's business model, but how long could they sustain this? They wanted Unnati to become financially viable on its own. What else could they do to make Unnati's business model less vulnerable to external threats and internal challenges?

Akshamaala: The Milieu of Unnati

Sinha and Prasad were colleagues and close friends at a major telecom consulting firm located in the National Capital Region of India. They had similar educational backgrounds — a bachelor's degree in engineering and a master's degree in management — and had worked for more than a decade in the telecom, information technology (IT), and consulting industries. Both were connected by a strong gut feel that adaptation of information and communication technology (ICT) in Indian agriculture was low and they could make a difference using their skills and experience. For two years they studied the sector and its trends. Finally, in April 2010, the pair decided to try their hand at entrepreneurship. Their objective was to leverage their experience to develop IT-based solutions for clients to benefit consumers from rural India. They partnered to create a small firm called Akshamaala.

i Unnati (a Hindi word) means development or progress.

Published by WDI Publishing, a division of the William Davidson Institute (WDI) at the University of Michigan.

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