

E-commerce startup Yebo Fresh easing access to food supplies in townships

Yebo Fresh, a local grocery delivery startup servicing township areas in Cape Town, is helping township residents access vital food supplies safely during the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown. The delivery element of the business is, in addition, assisting charities grappling with the idea of how to get food parcels into informal settlements where issues such as access and crime may raise concerns.



Yebo Fresh was founded by Jessica Boonstra in September 2018 in the Hout Bay township of Imizamo Yethu. The community-driven, technology-enabled online shopping service has since expanded to include the townships of Hangberg, Langa, Gugulethu, Khayelitsha, Mfuleni and Delft.

The concept was born out of a desire to improve quality of life for township residents by bringing e-commerce to their doors through the most powerful tool the majority of them had: their cellphones.

"Our goal was to provide access to healthier, quality food options in an affordable way for township residents. We wanted an innovative technology solution that would support communities where delivery is not a nice-to-have but a necessity in the absence of sufficient food retailing options," explains Boonstra.



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Lauren Hartzenberg 25 May 2020



Partnerships with charities

Recognising the strength of the startup's logistical network, charities are now partnering with Yebo Fresh to enable food parcels to be delivered to townships, fulfilling a vital service during Covid-19.

"We have been able to expand our grocery ordering model to deliver food parcels directly to people who are isolated within their homes and with very limited access under the lockdown to any other form of retail," says Boonstra.

The company sees its significant growth since launch as a clear challenge to the conventional wisdom that suggests townships are not open to e-commerce offerings. Covid-19 has seen Yebo Fresh expand even further, into a new warehouse space that's more than ten times larger than before, and the operation continues to create a number of new jobs and partnership opportunities.

"We are currently packing around 1,000 food parcels, amounting to 110,000 meals, daily. Soon we'll be able to double that volume," says Boonstra.



Connecting with customers

Customers place their orders either via the website, a WhatsApp order bot or a WhatsApp call service, but because not all customers have access to smartphones or know how to order online, the company also makes use of paper forms, which are then digitised by local agents.

In order to keep prices down, optimise delivery planning and reduce both stock levels and waste in the warehouse, Yebo Fresh sources directly from manufacturers and groups orders into packing- and delivery batches. In the meantime, Yebo Fresh customers are kept up to date about their order via SMS, informing them when an order has been packed and when delivery is expected.

"We then coordinate deliveries to easily-accessible and centralised locations such as community centres, schools, churches, daycare centres or even stokvel groups, which also allows us to optimise our delivery route," says Boonstra. "But we also deliver directly to a recipient's home."

The network of local drivers and agents is therefore vital to knowing how to navigate the often intricate labyrinth of township streets and ensuring that that delivery reaches the correct address, particularly in more informal areas.



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Funding for expansion

Even before the pandemic, Yebo Fresh had put fundraising strategies in place in order to create brand awareness and extend its reach through an expansion of both its logistics and core technology. The company's efforts in this regard helped it secure additional funding from investors.

Originally funded by UK entrepreneur and investor Professor Stefan Allesch-Taylor in September last year, YeboFresh secured further funds from angel investors Bas Hochstenbach and Frederik Gerner – the founders of early-stage investor E4Africa – who were joined by WooThemes co-founder Mark Forrester and former Digital Planet CEO Neil Watson.

It's the startup's mission, says Boonstra, to continue to push the boundaries on all fronts and expand its operations even further, on the ground operationally as well as in continuing to develop its technology: "Highly unusual times call for measures above and beyond. We need a consolidated effort to ensure that one of the most basic human rights – access to food – continues to be rolled out to all."

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