



Viber steps up with new business tools, targets PHL MSMEs

MESSAGING platform Viber unveiled on Tuesday a new set of business tools, initially targeting the Philippines because of its vast user community and vibrant small business sector.

Viber has started enabling business accounts with a free self-serve communications hub for discoverability and engagement, David Tse, senior director for Asia Pacific at Rakuten Viber, told reporters on the sidelines of the company's briefing in Pasay City. The features include a public business profile, 1:1 customer chats, search discoverability, dedicated chat folders, and a product catalog, according to Viber.

The new Viber for Business offerings are in line with the needs of over 300 beta-tested local micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs), among around 8,000 global participants, Mr. Tse noted.

"We have seen a lot of home-based, small businesses conducting their business on communities, channels, and group chats," he said of the 1.5 million global users the platform saw conducting business on Viber.

"We see that conversational commerce is happening," he added. "We see people wanting to have a conversation piece between buyers and sellers, and we have seen smaller platforms that are better at the messaging part."

"We want to kickstart a defined identity and growth for

their business, evolving based on the needs of the users."

Mr. Tse noted that many MSMEs do not have a website for their business. "This is going to help those who don't have the resources to set up and update a website, or even create a social media account."

In the first half, Viber saw a year-on-year increase in business accounts created (30%) and business messages delivered (34%) among big enterprises in the Philippines.

This prompted the platform to expand the same offering to MSMEs for free, Viber said in a press statement.

"Tailored pricing plans will be offered soon based on market feedback to expand the initial set of free self-serve business solutions," it added.

Regarding digital security, Mr. Tse said that Viber uses an algorithm across all their services to filter suspicious mobile numbers under spam accounts and inappropriate companies, with aid from their own list of legitimate businesses.

The new self-serve business accounts are available in the Philippines and Greece, with plans to onboard additional countries soon, Viber noted.

The platform also expects to integrate digital payment channels and other features in the future, Mr. Tse said. — **Miguel Hanz L. Antivola**

Innovative pivot:

Startup simplifies financial operations for small businesses

By Patricia B. Mirasol Multimedia Producer

BORN as a financial wellness application in 2020, NextPay quickly morphed into a digital banking suite tailored for small businesses. Its mission? To simplify, streamline, and de-stress financial operations.

The goal was to offer solutions that resonate with the pain points of small businesses, Don Pansacola, co-founder and chief executive officer of NextPay, said in an interview with *BusinessWorld*.

Businesses used the company's platform to pay their workforce, and in the process of paying their employees, NextPay would set aside money for the latter on their behalf.

"We've built an app where — when people get paid their salaries — we can help them automatically set aside money towards their savings goal, whether it's towards their emergency fund or even towards aspirational goals like their trip to Japan," Mr. Pansacola said.

But the pandemic period saw NextPay pivot its services, emphasizing helping businesses with their disbursement needs.

The public health crisis made it "almost impossible" for businesses, especially micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), to pay their workers, Mr. Pansacola noted.

Many small businesses found banking processes, like opening accounts, daunting.

"Another challenge would be the average daily balance you need to come up with to open such an account," he added.

"These are not really problems that big companies have to deal with," he noted. "It's the MSME market — from the small business all the way down to the entrepreneur — they're the ones who have no access to these financial services."

NextPay, Mr. Pansacola said, expanded its services to replace the need to open a corporate bank account.

To date, it serves over 12,000 companies and has processed payments worth of P5 billion.

MSMEs are not just economic units in the Philippines; they are the lifeblood of the Philippine economy, comprising 99.5% of total enterprises.

According to the Philippine Statistics Authority, MSMEs contribute 35.7% of the total value-added in 2020, 60% of all exports, representing 25% of total export revenues, and support 62.7% of total employment.

Many of these businesses grapple with optimizing their digital platforms, making online visibility a challenge. Transforming online engagements into tangible sales is also a daunting task, according to a 2022 report by the United Nations Industrial Development Organization.

Accessing suitable financing options can also be a steep climb for many MSMEs.

Philippine banks failed to hit the mandated quota for small business loans in the first half of 2023, data from the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas showed. MSME loans extended by banks amounted to P189.08 billion in the first quarter, comprising 1.93% of their total loan portfolio, or below the 8% quota.

"A lot of small business owners are stuck," Mr. Pansacola said. "They're not really able to grow their business because once they reach a certain scale, they're just stretched too thin."

Growing a business while managing the operational side of things — not to mention acquiring customers — is challenging, he noted.

"We're not even talking about having to manage your vendors and ensuring your employees are doing the job they need to do."



Alternergy unit forges lease, revenue-sharing deal with Rizal gov't for 100-MW wind project

ALTERNERGY HOLDINGS Corp. said its subsidiary inked a lease contract, including a revenue-sharing agreement, with the provincial government of Rizal for a 100-megawatt (MW) onshore wind project.

In a stock exchange disclosure on Tuesday, the listed energy company said it signed the contract on behalf of Alternergy Tanay Wind Corp. (ATWC) on Monday.

The company said the deal is "in respect of ATWC's utilization of parcels of land" that is registered in the name of the

provincial government for the development and implementation of the onshore wind project in Tanay, Rizal.

"The signing of our lease agreement from the Rizal Provincial Government is a positive development for our Tanay Wind Power Project," Alternergy Chairman Vicente S. Pérez, Jr. said in a media release. "This will allow us to proceed with the construction of the project by 2024."

ATWC was awarded a wind energy service contract by the Department of Energy in 2015,

giving the company 25-year concession rights to develop wind resources on provincial properties in barangays San Andres and Cuyambay in Tanay.

The renewable energy company placed the elevation of the wind power project at 300 to 600 meters above sea level.

"We are delighted to once again partner with Alternergy and deepen the ties built when Alternergy's Pililla Wind Farm was constructed in 2015 to establish the Rizal Province as the new capital for wind projects in the country," Rizal

Province Governor Nina Ricci A. Ynares said.

The provincial government had signed a lease in September 2012 for one of its properties to Alternergy's 54-MW Pililla wind farm, which started operations in 2015.

Alternergy is targeting to develop up to 1,370 MW of renewable energy sources such as onshore and offshore wind, solar, and run-of-river hydropower projects.

On Tuesday, shares of the company closed unchanged at P0.83 apiece. — **Sheldeen Joy Talavera**

Iron Mountain partners with AWS to boost services

IRON MOUNTAIN has partnered with Amazon Web Services (AWS) to enhance its data storage and management capabilities, the global records management and recovery services company said on Tuesday.

"We are excited to have our InSight SaaS platform and other data management services available in AWS Marketplace to enable our customers to achieve their digital objectives," said Joyce Housien, Iron Mountain's

vice-president and head of Southeast Asia and the Korean region, in a media release.

The partnership will help enable customers to use digital end-to-end data storage, data centers and management, Iron Mountain said.

It will also allow customers to use digital end-to-end data storage, data center and management services while also advancing AWS machine learning capabilities, the company added.

It said the collaboration covers information lifecycle management, which includes physical and digital content, while also allowing its customers to accelerate digital transformation from physical to digital cloud storage.

"The ability to turn data into valuable and meaningful information for our customers is a common objective for both our companies," Ms. Housien added.

Established in 1951, Iron Mountain provides storage, data center infrastructure, asset lifecycle management and information management services.

It is mainly engaged in digital transformation, data centers, secure records storage, information management, asset lifecycle management, secure destruction, and art storage and logistics. — **Ashley Erika O. Jose**

Globe moves to maintain connectivity ahead of disasters

GLOBE TELECOM, Inc. will continue to explore initiatives to ensure a reliable network amid the impacts of climate change and natural disasters, the listed telecommunications company said on Tuesday.

"Recognizing the impacts of climate change and using innovative technologies to manage them makes Globe operationally resilient," said Globe Chief Sustainability and Corporate

Communications Officer Maria Yolanda C. Crisanto in a statement via e-mail.

The Ayala-led company said it is further strengthening its commitment to adapt to the impacts of climate change, such as stronger typhoons, through an enhanced business continuity management (BCM) policy, which will ensure reliable connectivity in the event of disasters.

"Our commitment to our customers is to ensure that they stay connected especially in times of crisis. This updated BCM policy reaffirms our resolve to provide continuity of critical operations and delivery of key products and services to our customers whatever the situation may be," Ms. Crisanto said.

BCM is the company's approach to energy, environment, health, and safety management.

"The company is focused on strengthening its network infrastructure to be ready for disasters and prevent network disruptions," Globe said.

The company said its climate adaptation strategies include tapping renewable energy sources.

At the local bourse on Tuesday, shares in the company climbed by P3 or 0.17% to end at P1,805 apiece. — **A.E.O. Jose**



PAL set to reopen routes from Cebu to Mindanao and Bicol to meet seasonal demand

PHILIPPINE AIRLINES (PAL) said it will reopen more routes from Cebu to Bicol and Mindanao as it anticipates more passengers later this year in time for the holiday season.

"We look forward to flying more passengers and creating more healthy connections through the resumption of our Cebu-General Santos, Cebu-Legazpi, and Cebu-Ozamiz routes, in time for the peak holiday season," said PAL President and Chief Operating Officer Captain Stanley K. Ng.

Starting in December, flag carrier PAL said it would operate daily flights between Cebu and General Santos City (GenSan), which also includes daily flights between Cebu and Legazpi in the Bicol Region.

The company added that it would also resume its regular flights three times a week between Cebu and Ozamiz City starting Dec. 16.

"Our new routes will also allow for residents of GenSan, Legazpi, and Ozamiz to connect more conveniently via Cebu to Iloilo, Bacolod, Tacloban, Davao, Busuanga and other domestic destinations, as well as to Bangkok, Tokyo Narita and Seoul Incheon," Mr. Ng said.

Earlier this year, PAL said it would add two more routes to Taiwan under its expanded codeshare agreement with China Airlines.

Under the partnership, PAL will be offering four times weekly code-shared services between Manila and Kaohsiung in Taiwan.

The two airlines' codeshare partnership also calls for PAL and China Airlines to operate 14 weekly flights each. It also allows China Airlines to access the local carrier's domestic network by placing its "CI" code on select PAL-operated flights. — **Ashley Erika O. Jose**