

Kunle's innovation:

developing technology to improve workforce nutrition



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In combining technology-enabled kiosks and a ghost kitchen system, Scaling Up Nutrition Business Network (SBN) Nigeria member [Mealimeter](#) is addressing poor nutrition among young professionals, while also collecting previously unavailable food consumption data to improve decision-making and provide an efficient supply of nutritious food.

In 2014, Kunle Jinadu, Founder of Mealimeter, noticed a gap in Nigeria's nutrition sector. Despite a rise in start-ups offering healthy meals, drinks, and snacks, no one was efficiently reaching customers at scale and providing young working professionals with access to nutritious foods.

So Kunle developed an innovative enterprise to provide the infrastructure for this through a unique, three-point model that combines technology-enabled kiosks; computer terminals which provide access to information and allow for communication, commerce, and more; and a ghost kitchen system set-up for the preparation of delivery-only meals.

Mealimeter has combined a smart food vending machine with a unique model through which enterprises have access to shared kitchen space to produce food for delivery. These vending machines are deployed to offices across Lagos (with plans to expand further in Nigeria and across Africa), and link over 20 nutrition businesses to new markets. In doing so, the company effectively uses innovation to tap into Nigeria's workplace

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Kunle Jinadu, Founder, Mealimeter

catering industry – worth over USD 5 billion each year – while improving consumers' access to healthy, affordable meal options.

Playing the numbers game

To change people's behaviour, Kunle and his team needed to make nutritious meals easier and faster to access. To start, they dropped the delivery cost per item, as multiple food products are delivered to central locations – eliminating the transaction cost associated with delivering single products to multiple destinations.

"The logistics of food means you can't store it for extended periods. However, [by] using a ghost kitchen model and kiosks, we attempted to make it easier to have multiple vendors serve each office location – almost like bringing nutritious 'food courts' as you'd have in malls, to offices," Kunle adds. This approach ensures improved variety for customers.

The smart vending machines deployed at local offices also provide Mealimeter with access to food consumption data that was previously unavailable in Nigeria, through sensor data and built-in artificial intelligence. This allows the company and its partners to remotely track shipments to vending machines, collect consumer data from machines to monitor usage for accurate resupply, and also track sales trends by location and time of year. The data is critical to understanding what foods are consumed and when, thereby facilitating more informed decision-making and an efficient supply of nutritious food.

Validation in victory

Mealimeter's innovative concept enabled the company to participate in the 2019 Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) National Pitch Competition in Nigeria, NutriPitch. The NutriPitch competition

provides a platform for small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Nigeria's nutrition sector to showcase their innovations, receive technical assistance and training, and compete for cash prizes. "Thanks to the facilitators and mentors, we gained a better understanding of the nutrition ecosystem – including the challenges, new customers, and vendors. We learned lots about product marketing, business strategy, investment readiness, and how to deliver a winning pitch," Kunle enthuses. "Apart from the excitement and very welcome good news, the prize is a validation of our work and the call for more innovation from our team. It is time to take this next step forward."

In addition to this competition, the team emerged as the second-runner up in the 2020 Global SUN Pitch Competition. At this competition, Mealimeter was named a winner and received a cash prize of USD 7,000, which is being utilised to build their vending tech for bigger locations and outdoor use.

Overcoming obstacles

Like many start-ups, Mealimeter experienced barriers accessing finance – especially once the

pandemic took hold. "Initially, I invested my savings to build our first three machines and cover sales costs to sign up our first set of offices," explains Kunle. "When we were ready to raise funds to service the locations who had signed up, COVID-19 struck, offices shut down, and that effectively ended all ongoing conversations. We've stayed alive using savings and taking up software consulting projects, but plan to reopen investment conversations once we get confirmation of resumption from our top customers."

The pandemic also highlighted another concern: the enterprise's reliance on its primary users, who are workers within office spaces. In 2020, Mealimeter deployed two of its smart vending machines as a pilot but, when COVID-19 struck, professionals began working from home. Kunle explains that "most offices are either operating at about 20% capacity or are totally shut down," and having to adapt to social distancing measures and government restrictions. As a result, the enterprise has refrained from deploying further machines but is constantly thinking of other innovative ways to reach a wider customer base.

The company continues to face pandemic-related challenges head-on and views them



as opportunities to adapt. Through their initial launches within Nigeria, they received requests to upscale; and the team has maintained communication with these businesses in the hope of making an even greater impact when corporate customers return to workplaces.

As the country progressively relaxes COVID restrictions, Mealimeter will also leverage its innovative technology to help businesses make their cafeterias safer by eliminating the need for cash, physical contact, and crowds. Customers can download the Mealimeter mobile application to see what food is available in the nearest vending machine and pay. They can then approach the machine and scan a QR code using their phone to collect their food quickly and without human interaction.

"I think technology innovation in nutrition is just beginning to catch on," Kunle explains. "Generally though, it is pretty tough, and we have only stayed alive because of personal sacrifices of [the] Founders and support from the Global Alliance for Integrated Nutrition (GAIN), for example."

Visions for the future

The team hopes to achieve two goals to address the increasing levels of malnutrition in Africa. Firstly, "we want to scale our model to Kenya and aim to pilot a system for access to nutrition for work-from-home professionals [including research and development on recipe development]," Kunle explains. The second is to design "a different way to provide nutrition education so that people choose nutritious food before it becomes an urgent health need. I did a quick check with contacts in Nairobi and found that there isn't a solution similar to ours yet [as of 2020]. There's a massive adoption of mobile phones in the city and an increased consciousness to eat healthy. A combination

of these factors offers a good opportunity for Mealimeter."

Kunle shares three important recommendations for entrepreneurs:

- "It is important to have multiple customer groups, so income sources are diversified. We focused primarily on offices and, once COVID-19 shut them down, that affected our revenue."
- "Sell. Sometimes, selling and marketing skills are more important than the quality of your product. It is absolutely important to sell and that's probably the top function of the CEO."
- "As much as you can, focus more on the customer and less on investors."



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