

Chennai's Grace Supermarket chain has been online for over two years now, even before the COVID-19 lockdowns hit. But its website was a backburner project, a very small part of its operations. The chain's dozen physical grocery shops across Chennai have always been its mainstay, till the first nationwide lockdown of 2020 flipped the tables completely. Suddenly, the website was handling most of their sales. "We were also delivering to customers who placed orders over phone calls or WhatsApp," says Subramanian Sundaram, manager and head of operations.

To announce that they were available online, they put their website on their delivery vans ferrying goods around the neighbourhood, thus attracting even more customers.

Grace was one of the luckier



In the chaos of the first lockdowns, trusty neighbourhood grocery stores had to suddenly shift online, while juggling inventory and frantic sales. They did it in true kirana style...

Opt for the corona-combo

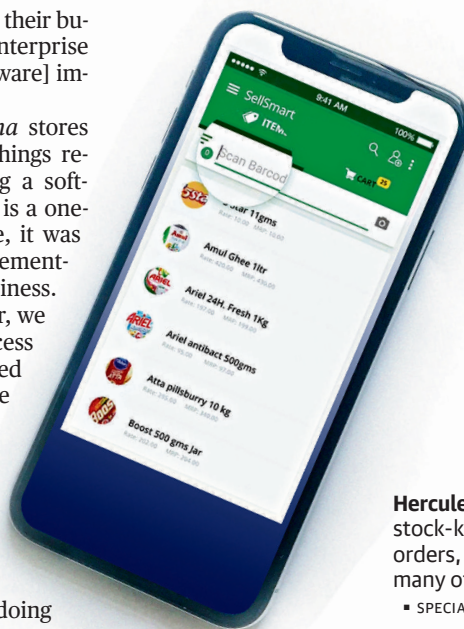
kirana stores – or perhaps one with more foresight; many others found themselves grappling with the unfamiliarity of online operations in a sudden need to keep business afloat, whilst being blindsided by the pandemic. This is where start ups like GoFrugal, a Chennai-based tech solutions firm setting up online systems and apps, stepped in.

GoFrugal shot to prominence during lockdown, having helped retail stores around the country move online. Kumar Vembu, founder and CEO, compares the process to "performing a complex bypass surgery when the patient was working." This is mainly because, though there was an urgent need to shift operations online, business hours were extremely limited and "*Kiranas*

couldn't afford to pause their business to get an ERP [Enterprise Resource Planning software] implemented."

Vembu adds, "*Kirana* stores are experts in doing things repeatedly. Implementing a software solution, though, is a one-time activity. For some, it was the first time they implemented an ERP for their business. Over the years, however, we have evolved a process where we have minimised the time required for the *kiranas* to implement our solution. In fact, our solution can be implemented in four hours, depending on the size of the business."

The firm has been doing



this since 2004 and boasts a clientele of over 8,000 *kirana* stores across the country. Recent challenges, however, meant it had to come up with solutions tailored to the pandemic. "We recently launched a 'corona combo' to help *kirana* stores quickly upgrade and serve customers omni-channel. The three apps, online-ordering, delivery, stock-pick, have helped them win new customers, serve them faster and better," says Kumar.

Some challenges have remained constant, such as keeping inventory and training personnel. For many employees, work so far had required little to no tech-related education or training. "It was hard to get *kirana* staff to use software solutions. Also, constant attrition was a challenge, more so post the pandemic. We listened to them and empathised with their predicament," says Kumar. Their solution was adding a "practice mode" to the software, and setting up training videos.

Once equipped and trained, the friendly neighbourhood grocery shops just had to do what they do best: serve their customers. As Subramanian points out, neighbourhood shops and chains have one large advantage over online-only services like Big Basket: "Those brands have one or two warehouses, from where they have to plan out deliveries across the city. For us, each of our 26 shops in different neighbourhoods acts as a mini warehouse, since all the stock is right there."

Having the product ready for dispatch just one or two lanes away from the customer makes a massive difference to delivery, explains Subramanian. It also helps that the people nearby already know and trust the store, and are glad to find a familiar name online.

Herculean task The shift had to take in stock-keeping, sales records, taking orders, coordinating with suppliers and many other aspects of business

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