
My Business Model Of An Online Platform For Voluntourism

Globally, travel and tourism is one of the fastest growing sectors. In 2017, the industry reached over US\$1.5 trillion in travel bookings – a result of globalization and rising disposable incomes. Within this sector, “voluntourism” (pairing travel with education and volunteer opportunities) represents the most rapid growth and is worth US\$173 billion per year.

Younger generations make up most of this growing tourist segment, including Millennials and the rising GenZ who are eager to make an impact, raise their social consciousness, and broaden their worldview. Despite consumers’ good intentions, the industry has received much criticism for commoditizing voluntourism, deprioritizing the causes served in favor of the volunteers, and lacking a formal vetting system – of both organizations and travelers.

Today, many conscious travelers are eager to give back while on vacation. However, it has become extraordinarily difficult for such consumers to identify an organization that fits their skillset/interests and is also reputable (as the industry’s exponential growth has led to corruption in many developing countries/underserved communities). On the other hand, the recipient communities are also at a loss because the industry has become heavily focused on satisfying volunteers’ desire for an experience rather than the actual needs of the beneficiaries. This lack of balance is proving to have a detrimental impact – leading to corruption and exploitation in some recipient communities. For example, between 2005 and 2015 the number of orphanages in Cambodia increased by 60% and it is speculated that this was linked to the uptick in foreigners’ humanitarian holidays as most of the children were not orphans but exploited for business gains. Despite the array of criticism regarding voluntourism, it is a market that will continue to grow. As such, it is imperative for the industry to develop a modern, ethical, operational model – one that serves both travelers and hosting beneficiaries. For voluntourism to positively impact underserved communities, the service opportunities must be rooted in authentic local need, equitable partnerships, knowledge sharing, transparency, and sustainability.

There has been an array of academic research and a call for “Fair Trade Learning Principles” to be implemented in the management and operation of volunteer programs. However, there is not one solution that addresses both the needs of consumers (transparent and credible resources which provide access to vetted, reputable organizations that fit their skillsets) and the needs of the local beneficiaries (equal footing in the exchange of services to ensure the volunteers meet the criteria needed to meaningfully contribute). The current solutions that attempt to follow an ethical framework, such as [visit.org](#), are a step in the right direction, though they do not meet the mark. Such sites provide the opportunity to sign up for voluntourism projects, but do not include the other side of the equation – the local beneficiaries. Other voluntourism companies I discovered in my search (e.g. [voluntourism.org](#) and [projects-abroad.org](#)) were a direct reflection of the current problem and my own experience trying to discover volunteer opportunities: there is no credible vetting tool and no way to know if the companies are trustworthy or if they are partnering with corrupt organizations. Furthermore, the current businesses I have identified in the voluntourism realm lack the platform sophistication, network effects, user experience, and digital marketing strategy required to attract and retain an

engaged consumer base.

My initial business model is inspired by Airbnb in that it is an online community that connects and processes transactions between travelers and hosts. However, in this case, “Mitra” will be a platform to connect socially-minded travelers seeking volunteer opportunities directly with vetted and reputable local organizations in need of volunteers for specific projects or interested in educational exchanges (e.g. “Hanoi Kids Tours” in Vietnam, which pairs local Vietnamese students who wish to expand their cross-cultural experiences and practice another language with tourists in exchange for a tour around Hanoi). Beneficiaries can post their volunteer opportunities when needed, similar to an Airbnb host posting her home on the platform for specific dates, and travelers can search for opportunities based on interests, skillset, location, and project duration. This solution is unique in that it still allows a volunteer to “choose her own adventure,” but goes two steps further in that it provides access only to verified beneficiaries, easing any traveler fears of fraud or concerns of corruption, and provides host organizations with an equal position in which they are in control of the opportunities they post and the volunteers selected.

Mitra is a global community and booking platform that facilitates verified volunteer opportunities and positive cultural exchanges by connecting socially conscious travelers with reputable local community organizations in need.

Creating meaningful social impact and fostering an entrepreneurial spirit are of huge importance to me in both my personal and professional life – and I believe Mitra is a perfect intersection of my passion, skillset, network, and assets. Prior to Ross I spent 7 years building consumer and cause marketing campaigns for global Unilever brands (including Dove, Dove Men+Care, and POND’S) and HP Inc. I have extensive experience in project and client management, integrated (multi-channel/360) marketing, communications, and consumer insights, and am well positioned to build an authentic brand and engaged customer base. Nearly three of those years were spent in Singapore where I had the opportunity to stretch myself personally and professionally, work with professionals from emerging markets, and gain a heightened cultural awareness as well as a diverse network of talented and interesting global citizens.

My time in Singapore gave me unique access to volunteer opportunities and cultural exchanges throughout South Asia and South East Asia, which exposed me to many of the issues I addressed above. While working abroad I was also introduced to a start-up social enterprise, Rebelhouse Studios – a social impact production company, for which I have provided ongoing pro-bono marketing and fundraising support.

Beyond my tightknit Singapore network, I have close contacts in entrepreneurship, social impact and non-profit industries who are excited by the promise of Mitra and have offered to serve as my advisors (each advisor is a successful entrepreneur spanning the social impact, media, fashion, and investment/VC industries). Furthermore, I am extremely fortunate in that I have a national network of successful, socially conscious, highly philanthropic individuals, who hail from all walks of my life – from my days at Bowdoin College to my work in NYC, Chicago, and San Francisco – who I believe will support me in raising capital to build Mitra and partner with Points of Light or Charity Navigator to vet potential partners for a pilot.