

## **"There's a lot of credibility because it's a small place": Eric Wong Poh Sang, Laotian distributor and retail owner, on how and why he sells affordable eyeglasses at his bedding store**

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard**

**March 13, 2024**

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Can you start by telling me a little bit about your approach to eyeglasses and the model that you use?**

**Eric Wong Poh Sang:** Well, personally, I actually work with an international mining company and I've lived [in Laos] almost 20 years now. So I always feel that I want to stay relevant and in touch with the communities and that's how the conversation started with Jeremy Hockenstein last year.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: You are with the mining company full-time?**

**Eric Wong Poh Sang:** Yes, that's right. That's my full-time job. And at the same time, I also help to run a retail outlet in Laos, which I started last year, to provide what they call hygienic and sustainable types of bedsheets. Because Laos is a landlocked country, they've been heavily influenced by a lot of commercials in Thailand. Things that we call substandard dump into this country and sell at a premium price. So that's the reason why I started the business, to give people a better sleep. That means that it's better health and a better mood the following day, and with a better price.

So my conversation started with Jeremy on retailing because he wanted to support me and he asked me what sort of a gift he could bring back to the US for his wife. And then we talked about having a site for retail [sales], because retail can always play a significant role in bridging certain gaps in certain countries. And I have the luxury of traveling to so many different countries for my

mining work, and I always feel very uncomfortable when I think about the Laos consumer always being marginalized because they do not know what they don't know.



Jeremy said one of his projects currently is supporting the African region on eye care and eyeglasses. He said that it can be very cheap, like \$1 or \$2, and that it can really help people to earn more. They've done a lot of studies and found that it's increased productivity by 23% of the workforce, especially in those [vision intensive] industries, like garment factories and farming.

Laos' current industry is very much focused on agriculture, and they have a lot of garment factories because of the lower labor costs. We have a lot of products like Puma, Slazenger, Nike that [certain parts are produced here and] then sent to Vietnam, where they will continue the whole supply chain process in order to be a finished product for retail in the global world.

So I liked that idea. Jeremy had been in Laos for more than 10 years to break the cycle of poverty in Laos, and I said, "Do you think Lao people don't have eye problems?" They have the same problem, they have the same productivity problem, and they do not know what they don't know. But currently, most of the eye care you can only go through to a special medics or optical shop that have very limited hours.

Reading glasses in more advanced countries are very straightforward. You can buy it off the shelf, you can go to a pump station, any retail [store], any convenience store, you grab one and put it on. But not [in] Laos. Laos has always been told and educated in such a way by the business [that you] need to go to do your eye test and then you're going to pay \$60 for glasses. I was like, "Oh my God, a dollar or two."

The following day I had a conversation with my team member, a local colleague in my mining company, and I asked her, she's a [Laos] local and comes from a provincial remote area community, about eye care. I said, "Let's talk about your parents. Both of your parents are former teachers in a remote community, so I'm sure they need eye care or eyeglasses because they've been teaching for so many years." She told me that two months ago she drove three hours back to her hometown and brought them to the city to get reading glasses. The cost, aside from transportation costs, was around \$70. Which is expensive. I was like, okay, interesting. And then I contacted Jeremy.

### **Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How did you and Jeremy ever meet? How did your paths cross?**

**Eric Wong Poh Sang:** I used to work for Jeremy in the social enterprise Digital Divide Data. Back 12, 14 years ago. I really grew that company to be more commercial rather than social. I grew it within that short period of time, like tripled their workforce, tripled their revenues. Then MMG, which is my current company, heard about this and they approached me because they want to put in a captive center, which is shared services, in Laos, because the mining company has a footprint everywhere in the world. They're trying to establish business services somewhere in one of their assets. So they heard of me and then the intention is because I'm a Malaysian, they

wanted to put a hub in Malaysia. So after working two years with them, I managed to convince them Laos can deliver it. So that's how we started to invest in people.



We are very successful right now. We are producing world-class back offices in Laos, the only company right now doing that. It's a different journey. So I talked to Jeremy and that's how I worked together with Jeremy on this. I shared that I think retailing in eye care can definitely play a very significant role in bridging the healthcare gaps, especially in poorer countries like Laos, because access to healthcare and reading glasses, as simple as [it seems], can be very limited in this country.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard:** When you said that your colleague's parents came to the city to get the glasses, where did they get screened? How did they figure out they needed the glasses?

**Eric Wong Poh Sang:** [They went to an] optical shop when they felt that they had poor visibility and their eyes couldn't see things. They came to the city for both the screening and the glasses because they don't have a shop in the village.

So I'm just thinking about how I can integrate the affordable glasses that Jeremy can provide into a retail sector. Since I have access to the retail due to my home bedding business, it's just one of the SKUs, just one of the additional items that I can lease into the store. I want to make sure it's more accessible and it's more affordable because I see in the long term, the convenience of the retail outlet compared to the optical shop.



The optical shop operates in very limited hours because you involve a doctor, an optometrist, and they're making a lot of money so their working hours are very short. And then people traveling [from] villages is not easy. Sometimes you need to travel 10 hours in order to get to the big city because there's no infrastructure or anything. And they can't afford planes of course. So I'm talking about retail. Usually the retail store is more likely to offer extended hours from morning, 9:30, until nighttime, 9:00. So there are more hours. Then the most important thing is covering weekends. Most optical shops won't do that. And so that's the whole idea to make it easier for people to visit and at their own convenience, anytime.



Another thing is, if we can establish a better retail chain, that means that I can purchase the glasses supply in bulk. That will further reduce the costs, even though I know currently it's like \$2, which is very cheap. But I still believe that we can further optimize it given my knowledge in sourcing [from] China, they can produce even cheaper than that and still maintain that quality. I'm just talking about maybe you can have that bulk then I have a discount with a free box or free cloths to wipe, to look after it, rather than just putting reading glasses in a plastic bag.

So that is one of the key advantages that I see. How do I integrate eye care into retail in this country?

So just want to make it more interesting and you want to change, I mean it's a small step, it's not going to be a big business, but that small initiative is actually sending a message to the optical shop. Don't rip off [consumers].

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How do people know that they can come to you and where do you get your glasses?**

**Eric Wong Poh Sang:** First of all because my retail is currently selling home bedding, I have one of the most fantastic locations in Vientiane, in the city. And not only that, because of the branding that I have been licensed in Laos, it is one of the top brands in Southeast Asia but never present in Laos. So using that leverage to talk to the retail management company, which is also an international retail company, so they know how strong our brand is. So I always can get a very premium location.



We print out certain props that, even though it's nothing related to my bed sheets or pillows, [we put it] on the counter. I came from Unilever before I came to Laos. So it's all about impulse buying. If you put something at the cash out counter and have a cute little prop that will distract people's attention, that distraction actually creates awareness and we are doing quite well. Last year, we started six months ago, we sold more than 150 glasses so far in the retail shop. And right now I expanded to another new store. So I will have the eyeglasses there as well so that we expand together with our business.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Where do you get the eyeglasses from?**



**Eric Wong Poh Sang:** From VisionSpring. Their distribution is in China, and Laos is a landlocked country to China and borders Laos. The only thing that I pay is the land logistics from China to Laos, which is not very expensive compared to when they ship it from China to Africa.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Where do people get screened? How does that happen?**

**Eric Wong Poh Sang:** All right, interesting. When we started, aside from in store, I believe that that impact is not enough. So in the country, at least a million people require reading glasses. And my store is just very limited in Laos and at the same time, [the glasses are] not my full-time job. So it's very difficult.

When I first started this, I prepared a couple of good selling points and I started to have a partnership with NGOs because the key thing is the NGOs, it's not about giving out free [glasses]. The NGO delivers eye care services to underserved areas. I think that's the key. And they have reached a wider audience.



But at the same time, I also found out that all these NGOs, if they're going to provide the glasses, they still need to source it somewhere. They still need to source it outside of Laos. So this way I [am the] supplier on the ground, so they can come to us anytime. They can look at the store, they can pick and choose because in the past it would take them four weeks to get their stock in the country. Right now they can get it within four hours, and this is how we ship it.



I partnered with Fred Hollows, one of the largest eye care foundations in the world. Fred Hollows happen to be next door to my current mining company and we are very close. So I [am] their supplier. [I can] add value on resourcing because [within all of] Fred Hollow, they limited staff, if I'm not mistaken, four staff. At the same time they still need to manage all the programs and then they still need to do the sourcing. So right now, they work with us on the activities of a procurement, we help them by supplying and delivering it to their doorstep. More efficient. So it's a win-win situation.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: When somebody comes into your store, are you selling directly to the consumer?**



**Eric Wong Poh Sang:** Yes. Reading glasses are very similar to a magnifier. So we created a small little reading card, like a name card. The front [of the name card] introduces our company and the back is actually an eye tester.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Who does the eye testing?**



**Eric Wong Poh Sang:** My retail staff. What they do is they read it. [Depending on how far away they hold the card] they will know it is 1.0. It's the diopter. And if this is a little bit further, then it'll be 1.5. So it's up to that individual and the way they read it. Right now we improvise with a string attached to the card. So you hook the string on your glasses and then maximize the distance of the string, that is to answer how much diopter you need.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: One of the things you were saying was about how the location of where your retail shop is really a tipping point. How do you reach people in rural areas?**



**Eric Wong Poh Sang:** And this is where the partnership with the Fred Hollows [comes in] because they have to reach a wider audience because they've been around in Laos for many years and technically they know every single community center. And they [give the glasses to the community].

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: So you're primarily doing supply side. But you are also doing a little bit of demand generation because of the way that you position things.**

**Eric Wong Poh Sang:** Yep. I think that is my limitation – being part-time, rather than full-time.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What's your partnership model? How are you working with the Ministry of Health?**



**Eric Wong Poh Sang:** We don't work with the Ministry of Health and the reason is it's better to go through Fred Hollow for instance, which is an international organization, and they have a better relationship with the Ministry rather than us. If we start to go into the Ministry then there will be a separate element that I need to manage.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What about optometrists and ophthalmologists? You don't work with them either?**

**Eric Wong Poh Sang:** No, I talked about that with Jeremy when we first started because we just do not want to go there because it's fair enough they have the commercial model and then if I'm going to supply to them, the price will still go back to 60 and 70. It defeats the whole intention why we want to start something.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How much are you selling them for right now, both to Fred Hollow and to your customers directly?**



**Eric Wong Poh Sang:** I sell it to Fred Hollow for like \$2.20. [That includes] just 10% to cover admin costs and logistic costs. And then I sell directly in retail for around \$3.80.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How did you decide those prices?**

**Eric Wong Poh Sang:** It depends on the subsidies. With Jeremy and Abi's help, they've already subsidized most of the costs. And I look at my business model itself and you want to make it affordable at the same time not [taking on] losses. So the money itself actually allows me to reinvest in buying new glasses in the future.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Are you working with any, or under any regulatory frameworks or authorities?**

**Eric Wong Poh Sang:** No.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Do you feel like there's some parts of your model that can be scaled by someone else, outside of you?**

**Eric Wong Poh Sang:** It will be tough and the reason is because of the network itself in a landlocked country, or in the least developed countries. Credibility is very important. And so my presence, my name itself, has actually helped a lot because people know that it's Eric's project and there's a lot of credibility because it's a small place here.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: So what's that scaling look like?**



**Eric Wong Poh Sang:** I believe the key for scaling will be reaching out to pharmacies because, in poor countries, people usually rely on pharmacies rather than on doctors. That is how it is. So if my scaling is basically just to have a couple more merchandisers and the merchandiser will be the one that reaches out to a bigger scale of the retail [market] by distributing to pharmacies. And currently, I can't do that because managing a merchandiser is a different game. Managing the workforce of the merchandiser, who are not motivated much by income or are not motivated because they do not know what they don't know. It would take an extensive time to train them to build their mindset to understand how important merchandising is in the business.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard:** I hear what you're saying about how everyone knows you and you yourself have a brand following. But if I went to Laos today, and I opened up a shop doing screenings and selling glasses, under my name, I assume there's going to be high levels of skepticism. So I'm curious, is it just your name that built the trust or is there a way that people could replicate even just the screening part, if they weren't you?

**Eric Wong Poh Sang:** They can replicate if they really want. I think the pricing [is important], aside from the credibility. There's a lot of people who have better credibility than myself here. And I think our positionings, our products, and our pricing exactly match what is required. And then the people on the ground, which is my sales team, my colleagues, they understand from the passion side of it and the reason why I'm doing it. All my colleagues are local, [from] Laos, so they understand the intention of it. They put in more passion when they're introduced to the customer during the testings and they learn better.



We have done a couple of training sessions with VisionSpring. I had a call with Jordan [Kassalow] and a couple of calls with VisionSpring's Nigeria team. They have more than eight years of experience, so they've been sharing the lesson learned with us and we pick it up from there. My local team who are doing the bedsheet sales, they pick it up and really see the intention because it never crossed their minds that reading glasses could be so affordable.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard:** And what about from the customer's point of view? I can imagine that, like other places, people don't really prioritize eye care. I mean people have to prioritize everything else. You have malaria, you have education, you have work. How did you get people to care?



**Eric Wong Poh Sang:** I can share with you from a small scale perspective. So it's a small scale in the store based on our experiences. When we print out the receipt after someone buys a bedsheet, we always give them the receipt to look at the price and the items. We have customized that experience to customers when they come and buy our bed sheets. When they look at the receipt, [we can see if they] need help to look at the receipt better. And we put the glasses at the counter, so we give them the glasses [to try]. We are educating by [letting them see] "Oh yeah, I can see the amount of the money." And especially people coming from poor countries are always

very conscious about costs. So when they look at it and say, "Oh, it's so much better with this." And this is how we create that interest.



That is on a small scale, but if you're talking about a larger scale, this is where partners like Fred Hollows, they're fantastic. They have testing, they have road shows, they have a lot of eye care programs in the countries as part of their foundation program. So this is where we tag along.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How do you tag along?**

**Eric Wong Poh Sang:** We provide them some resources because they have only a small team in their whole foundation. Some of my team volunteer to be part of their roadshow program.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Can you tell me anything else about your relationship with the foundation or other insights that you feel other people could learn from? What about your approach is working that other people could do now?**



**Eric Wong Poh Sang:** I think it's the understanding of a structural approach of business retailing. Retailing, it sounds easy, you buy and sell, but it's never that easy because there are a lot of boots on the ground. It's about how you prepare the preps, how you prepare social media awareness, how do you create that? How do you manage your inventory, how do you manage the supply chain logistics? All these are small little things, but being such a small business, you just can't subsidize all this with your earnings. It's not enough. So it needs to be on a bigger scale.

If you ask me to stand alone with these eyeglasses without the bedsheet business, definitely it won't work. It's not sustainable in the business, but reading glasses can be just a byproduct. And this byproduct itself can grow. It can grow after three or four years, that is the time needed. A lot of people don't have the financial resources or the patience to do a trading business or retailing business that [requires] waiting for the next five years. Then only you can turn into black or green. And I think that's too much. It's not easy. And that's the reason why they make it a little bit unaffordable because they need those margins to sustain their business in the early stage of their business cycle.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: That makes total sense. Is there anything you're seeing with your partnership with Fred Hollow that you think could provide some insights for us?**



**Eric Wong Poh Sang:** I think our collaboration is very straightforward. We give support to them with resources and they buy [reading glasses] from us. We see them as one of our key customers right now and hope more in future. They have committed to, for example, 5,000 glasses, which is a lot. And I understand what their pain points are. The pain point is not about their audience or their target customer. Their pain point is more about sourcing, the pricing



and quality that they can get because they're a foundation. They can't afford to pay \$10 for glasses. Right now they're paying me \$2 for glasses.

The value I can add being a partner is not just about the money or the arbitrage of the cost, but it's also about what sort of resources I see as their need, which is why I'm talking about having two or three individuals tag [along] when they have a program. Just to support them in terms of packing, support them in terms of delivering, support them in terms of being assistants to work with them during the roadshow because they'll be very busy handling a lot of different people. They have a high demand. And this way, having volunteers coming from my end to support them, that makes this partnership more sustainable.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: And what about outside of Laos? Do you feel like the things you're saying here – about private retail or some private tie-in with a nonprofit or government or pharmacies – do you think that's something specific to Laos? Or do you think that what you're doing can be replicated elsewhere?**



**Eric Wong Poh Sang:** It can be replicated. As I mentioned, standalone [shops] for reading glasses are not sustainable. So you need a stronger partnership because the ultimate aim is you want to collaborate with the government or NGOs because they have the same intention. The intention for me is how do we deliver eye care to underserved areas or people with the disability gap and you want to bridge that gap. I can't afford to open an eye care shop in a village that only has 200 people. It won't work from a business model [perspective]. The only thing that works is to work with NGOs who hold workshops once a year in that community. This way you really can cover them, but not permanently.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: So Fred Hollow goes into these rural, small communities every so often, does the screenings with community health workers and brings your glasses to those areas so that people can purchase them. It's all happening in one touch point?**

**Eric Wong Poh Sang:** Yes. They do have a connection with community health workers in the local area. And I want to partner with Fred Hollow. What I want is to be their vendor, or their supplier, to support them. That will help in terms of an economy of scale.

Most of the decisions are coming from the regional office I assume. What they're doing locally. Because they know my passions and they know why I'm doing it, that's the reason why they convinced their regional office to agree to this purchase plan. So that's where I fit into their supply chain, I remove their pain points with a more efficient supply chain..

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What are you trying from now to the end of the year?**



**Eric Wong Poh Sang:** I'm trying to expand to have a few more corporate partners. When I say corporate, [I mean that] these are big corporate companies in Laos context – buying and subsidizing these kinds of glasses then distributing [them] to their community, especially those

hydropower companies. That's my aim because when you talk about hydro companies, hydropower, or the mining companies, they usually will engage many local communities in their concessionaire area. So I want them, the CSR [corporate social responsibility] to be better rather than just distributing blankets or [something] as example. They should see eyeglasses as part of their support because eyeglasses are actually helping people to see better. Once you see better, you can do more.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard:** Are you actively working on trying to get other stores and other corporations to do that right now?

**Eric Wong Poh Sang:** Yes, but unfortunately they have what is usually called a community fund. So the community fund is the concessionaire owners need to put some money into the community fund and this fund is actually chaired by the local leader. Unfortunately most of the community funds haven't been interested in eyeglasses. They want things like [infrastructure improvements], like you build a road, you build a bridge, and then you can appoint local contractors and people. They have more benefits from that, [whereas with] eye glasses, they wouldn't have much benefit. How much can you earn from the glasses? That is a roadblock that I need to clear. But we are working on it.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard:** I'm really excited to speak with you again in a few months. Thank you.

## ICON LEGEND



Advocacy



Money



Supply



Demand generation



Partnerships



Technology



Distribution channel



Regulation



Training



Media campaigns and marketing



Screening

*Ambika Samarthya-Howard (she/her) is Solutions Journalism Network's Chief Innovation Officer. She strategizes on communications, metrics, impact, product and technology, leveraging platforms for the network and creating cool content. She also leads the Solutions Insights Lab, an initiative of SJN that uses targeted research and analysis to identify and interrogate what's working and what's not in a particular sector or field. She has an MFA from Columbia's film program and has been creating, teaching and writing at the intersection of storytelling and social good for two decades. She has produced content for Current TV, UNICEF, Havas, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and Prism.*

*\* This interview has been edited and condensed.*