Speaking to users and shopping for families with diverse dietary preferences, a profile of FoodLama

As part of our quick fire questions series – or QFQs – we spoke to Damilare Ogunleye, CEO and cofounder of FoodLama about online grocery shopping, constant collaboration with user groups on Facebook and Reddit and becoming a ubiquitous advisor in the universal customer's food journey.

The idea behind _FoodLama_ was born out of the personal challenges of one of the cofounders, Santiago. When he was a toddler, he was diagnosed with eczema; it was his mother who discovered that the root cause was an allergy to corn – an ingredient she found almost everywhere she looked, in so many different derivatives and forms. He is also allergic to nuts, his brother to gluten, and his mum is vegan. He realised that shopping for families with diverse dietary preferences was very complicated – the recommendations shown often don't work, and it is hard to find great new products that match different dietary needs.

I joined Santiago to build FoodLama because of my experiences as an

entrepreneur and a food manufacturing engineer at Nestle where I experienced gaps in the commercial considerations made by brands. Together, we convinced Anas to join the team and lead technology development. Anas brings 15 years of experience in Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning with a research distinction in the field from Imperial College.

Tell me about the business – what it is, what it aims to achieve, who you work with, how you reach customers and so on?

If you have allergies, intolerances, or lifestyle choices, online grocery shopping is either tiring or simply impossible. From poor recommendations to clumsy filters, the experience grocers provide is broken. FoodLama aims to solve that. FoodLama is a Google-backed easy-to-use chrome extension making grocery shopping with dietary preferences, allergies and intolerances easy.

Users add FoodLama as an extension to their browser. They then set the dietary requirements or preferences of everyone in their household on FoodLama, add the extension to their browser, and simply keep shopping on their grocer's platform as they normally would. FoodLama shows small avatars on the product for what products the user can and can't have. For products they can't have, users can click the avatar to see a recommendation of the best alternative that matches their household's preferences from that grocer or from other grocers. This helps them save time from having to read long ingredient lists or being restricted to the small free-from sections that retailers provide.

How has the business evolved since its launch? When was this?

We launched the company in the autumn of 2021 raising capital and spent the last few months speaking to users and building the product. To date we have surveyed and interviewed 1500+ users in the UK on some of the challenges they face with online grocery shopping due to their preferences and used their feedback for our product roadmap.

To give you an example, early on while we were building the prototype, we put out a post for recruiting a content writer in a Facebook group for people with food intolerances and got this _response_. Such close interactions with users

have been very useful in how we think about the problems as well as how we might be able to solve them. We launched our beta a few weeks ago which currently allow shoppers to use FoodLama on ASDA and TESCO with support for a few more retailers coming soon.

How are you funded?

We are backed by some of the most notable angels in Europe including a board member of Kraft Heinz and founders who have exited to companies like Twitter and Snap Inc, further giving us access to expertise in the food industry as well as building successfully exited ventures.

In addition, we are also backed by Google, giving us unique access to the best of Google's people and products, partnership and distribution opportunities.

What has been your biggest challenge so far and how have you overcome this?

Our biggest challenge so far is ensuring that we are getting the best feedback from our current and potential users. This means that we need to collaborate and work with a lot of leaders in food-preference communities, from social media influencers to industry bodies.

At the moment, we are currently finding our user clusters through niche Facebook Groups and Subreddits. We have also begun co-creating content with a network of Nano-Influencers and recently sponsored a nut-allergy focused podcast, _May Contain_. We hope to build on such initiatives that help us build trust with and recognition from our target communities.

How does FoodLama answer an unmet need?

Food discovery is still a huge challenge when you are shopping with preferences. Some grocers provide better filter options than others and sometimes have 'free-from' product categories.

However, such solutions are very limiting, resulting in people sticking to buying only what they have always bought or restricting their food choices to what is available. To discover new things, Facebook groups and Subreddits are where people ask for product recommendations.

FoodLama combines all these fragmented user behaviours into one place via a browser extension and layers it on top of their existing experience on the grocer site, which they are already familiar with.

What's in store for the future?

For us, the big picture is that FoodLama will become a ubiquitous advisor in the universal customer's food journey. Users will be able to learn about millions of ingredients, discover a new world of food and ultimately find and bond with a community of people with food preferences like them.

This level of hyper-personalisation of food discovery and the many channels of interactions will offer huge opportunities for brands and other stakeholders in the food value chain to build better relationships with their consumers.

What one piece of advice would you give other founders or future founders?

My advice for future founders would be to speak with users early and often. You need to put yourself out there even if you are not convinced that what you have now is beautiful. I remember the series of iterations we had to do and how we had to first build a prototype that kind of worked manually on only one section of a retailer site. We then went about with that prototype to show people and potential users. It's also what we used for our first fundraising round.

For other founders like myself, however early or late they are in the journey, my one advice would be for us to continue to build impactful ventures that change the world for good. FoodLama's goal is to make online grocery shopping much easier, and while we do hope to create some wealth from doing this, we believe that a world where you have the freedom and ease to find the food that suits you is a better one.

Damilare Ogunleye is CEO and cofounder of _FoodLama_.

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