



Building better e-stores in Africa

YouCan helps online sellers get up and running fast with IBM Cloud

by Kristin Fern Johnson
5-minute read

Innovation often starts with a simple observation—casually noticing that something is missing or not working as well as it could. In the case of YouCan, that observation revolved around an underserved market.

Zouhir Bahij, a co-founder and the Vice President of Engineering and Culture at YouCan, had a background in developing e-commerce technologies. He and his fellow co-founders noted that global providers of online store platforms had little-to-no presence in Africa. Across a continent consisting of more than 50 countries and a population of almost 1.5 billion, they saw a huge potential market and a clear opportunity.



Thus was born the concept for YouCan, a software-as-a-service (SaaS) e-commerce platform that enables

customers to quickly create online storefronts without the burden of setting up underlying infrastructure.

While the concept isn't novel, the customization of the platform to serve the African market is one of a kind.

The platform was already in development when the YouCan founders met with IBM in 2019 to discuss hosting possibilities. "From the beginning we had an advanced web architecture," says Bahij. "We knew our solution would bring value to the market, but we needed to prove it."

IBM quickly saw the platform's promise and invited YouCan to join the [Startup with IBM®](#) program. The program provided a pivotal source of support. "Being part of the IBM startup program enabled us to invest in infrastructure, which allowed us to provide a professional platform from the beginning," says Bahij. "We were able to build a monitoring stack so our engineers can observe any anomaly and react fast, and to monitor shipped features' key metrics."

In 2021, online sellers using YouCan platform generated

200

million in sales

YouCan platform servers process up to

5,000

requests per minute

A boost to performance in the cloud

Initially, YouCan hosted its platform on premises on the IBM Classic infrastructure using a mix of [IBM Cloud® Bare Metal Servers for classic infrastructure](#) and [IBM Cloud Virtual Servers for Classic Infrastructure](#). The Startup with IBM team provided the technology and expertise to get the platform up and running, as well as ongoing support.

YouCan tapped into its founding board members, including a key influencer in the e-commerce marketing world, to enlist a group of beta testers to try out the platform at the end of 2019. The



sellers testing the platform pulled in USD 1 million in online sales.

The success of the beta test led to a full-fledged launch in January 2020. The

YouCan team once again put their social media cachet to work, promoting the platform building up to the launch with an Instagram campaign and tutorials showing the YouCan platform in action.



Post-launch, the YouCan team continued to develop and maintain the platform, applying feedback from real-life users and iterating daily to add requested features and improvements.

A month after the launch, COVID-19 hit. Initially sales dipped, but by April, they began a steep and steady incline as the feasibility and practicality of selling online during lockdown became abundantly clear.

Over the course of the year, the company began to outgrow its existing architecture. It needed the flexibility and scalability that only the public cloud offered. In early 2021, YouCan migrated its platform to [IBM Cloud Virtual Server for Virtual Private Cloud \(VPC\)](#) on [IBM Cloud](#), using [IBM Cloud Object Storage](#)

to house its vast store of data, including customer files and images.

The company quickly experienced the benefits of the move. “IBM Cloud makes us more agile. We can spin up servers in minutes and power them down when we don’t need them,” says Bahij. “It gives us the flexibility to experiment with new things and significantly reduce both wasted energy and overhead resources.”

One of the keys to YouCan’s success is its focus on quality of service—providing a user-friendly experience and reliable platform performance. The platform’s rich assortment of customer-focused features attests to this commitment, as does its practice of innovating to better serve its African markets.

For example, in Africa, payments for online purchases are often cash on delivery, making it difficult for sellers to count online orders as bookings. To help its sellers resolve this issue, the company developed a way for them to accept orders as pipeline bookings that convert to full orders upon delivery and payment.

Similarly, in many parts of Africa, sellers are unable to accept online payments. The company is currently beta testing YouCan Pay, an online payment solution for sellers with broader ramifications for other African businesses. “We are working to promote online payment options in Africa,” says Bahij. “A lot of people want this, so we are trying to help solve a communitywide problem to the best of our ability.”

A rich ecosystem for the future

Today, YouCan and its customers are flourishing. In 2021 alone, sellers processed USD 200 million in order value through the platform. Since the platform's launch in 2020, they've processed more than USD 300 million, representing approximately eight million orders by 100,000 active stores. On the performance end, the platform serves up to 5,000 requests per minute.

As the company expands and takes on new customers and markets, it is looking into taking advantage of new managed services. "The IBM ecosystem is very rich. We would



love to experiment with additional services in the future, such as IBM Databases for ElasticSearch, which

greatly enhances data search and analysis capabilities," says Bahij. "As we grow, we'll be able to start

using managed services to reduce operational cost and effort and focus more on our business.”

The platform’s penetration in African markets is high, primarily because of the way YouCan has adapted to cultural aspects of those markets. In the future, the company is looking to expand into Asia, then possibly Europe and the Americas.

As of 2021, YouCan has officially graduated from the Startup with IBM program. As an IBM Cloud client, the company continues to interact with IBM on an ongoing basis. “When we have an issue or question, we always find our IBM representatives available. We very much appreciate that,” says Abderrahmane Goulahyane, Head of Web Operations at YouCan. “We’re getting our needs met with IBM and the amazing folks who work with us.”

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About YouCan

Founded in 2019, [YouCan](#) (external link) offers an online SaaS e-commerce platform. The company is headquartered in Rabat, Morocco, where it is focusing on serving African markets, and has a strong presence in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The company has more than 50 employees.

Solution components

- IBM Cloud®
- IBM Cloud Bare Metal Servers
- IBM Cloud Bare Metal Servers for classic infrastructure
- IBM Cloud Object Storage
- IBM Cloud Virtual Server for Virtual Private Cloud (VPC)
- IBM Cloud Virtual Servers
- IBM Cloud Virtual Servers for Classic Infrastructure
- Startup with IBM®