

Ather hires pros as electric scooter launch comes calling

Startup To Look At Fresh Funding Once Vehicle Delivery Starts

Sujit John & Shilpa Phadnis | TNN

Bengaluru: Ather Energy, the Bengaluru-based venture that is trying to do for scooters in India what Tesla has done for cars in the US — give the performance of a fossil-fuel vehicle in an electric one — has hired several senior automobile supply chain and sales professionals as it enters the phase of manufacturing and commercialization.

Tarun Mehta, who co-founded Ather with IIT Madras batchmate Swapnil Jain in 2013, told TOI that they have brought in a lot of experienced hands so that they don't have to "reinvent the wheel". "We can't ship a product as a startup. From a system perspective, we have to be a very mature company. Recalls can be very expensive for us. We want to reduce chances of that to as close to zero as possible," he said.

Mehta and Jain, both 27, are primarily engineers and have so far focused on building a great battery and an overall product. The scooter is expected to come with fast charging (in an hour), good range (60-80km) and a top speed of 72 km/hr, and will likely



Ather Energy co-founder Tarun Mehta (second from right), co-founder Swapnil Jain (extreme left) and chief business officer Ravneet Phokela (extreme right) look on as Flipkart co-founder Sachin Bansal tries out a prototype of Ather's electric scooter at an event earlier this year

be priced at a little under Rs 1 lakh. It has won funding from Tiger Global, Flipkart founders Sachin Bansal and Binny Bansal, and Silicon Valley-based big data firm Aerospike's co-founder V Srinivasan.

Mid-last year, Mehta had told TOI he expected to commercialize the scooter by middle of 2016. That hasn't happened. "There are still many productization challenges (those related to cost, packaging, manufacturability, integration). We realized this later. Hence the delay. We reworked the timelines and got all these new people."

Among the new appointees is Dr Sreeram, who has about 18 years of experience in creating processes and systems in companies including GE, Caterpillar and Maersk. He will be head of process excellence. Richard J Kim, who previously worked with Hyoseong Electric and helped set up a wiper motor and startup motor plant for the company in Chennai, has come in as VP of strategy & supply chain.

Rajaram Swaminathan, who was with Bloom Energy, Moser Baer, HP and Intel, and who did his Masters from Indian Institute of Science and

the National University of Singapore, has come in as head of hardware design. And Pradeep Kumar, who was the customer service and risk mitigation lead at Payback, the loyalty program for customers of retail businesses, has been appointed VP of sales and customer service. Kumar even served in the Indian Air Force as Squadron Leader.

About a year ago, Ather brought in Ravneet Phokela, who was with Flipkart and Payback, as chief business officer.

"We have a lot to learn from places like Germany and Silicon Valley, and these people we have hired have that experience. We also have to get to a stage where we can sell a million units a year," Mehta said. He said the company has enough funds for now, including to set up the manufacturing plant. "We will look at next round of funding once we start deliveries. At that point we would need to spend on sales, marketing, customer experience and will need to start thinking of expanding the plant," he said. He is unwilling though to give a timeline for the launch.