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Lifestyle Business,
Raymond Ltd.

▲ **Kabir Lumba**, Managing
Director, Lifestyle
International Pvt Ltd

▲ **Avani Davda**, Managing
Director, Godrej
Nature's Basket

▲ **Venu Nair**, Managing
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▲ **Ramesh Menon**,
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(India) Ltd.

CUSTOMER SERVICE EXCELLENCE

A SMILE IS WORTH THAT EXTRA MILE

By Sheetal Choksi and Varun Athreya

With the advent of e-commerce and its rapid adoption by consumers, the only way retail can stand the test of time in the age of digital proliferation is Customer Service Excellence. However, for every retailer trying to engage customers and inspire loyalty, there are several who haven't managed to make the cut.

So, what separates the superior from the average and the favourites from the forgotten? Well, truly successful retailers never forget the fact that customer loyalty is directly proportional to customer experience; always has been and always will be.

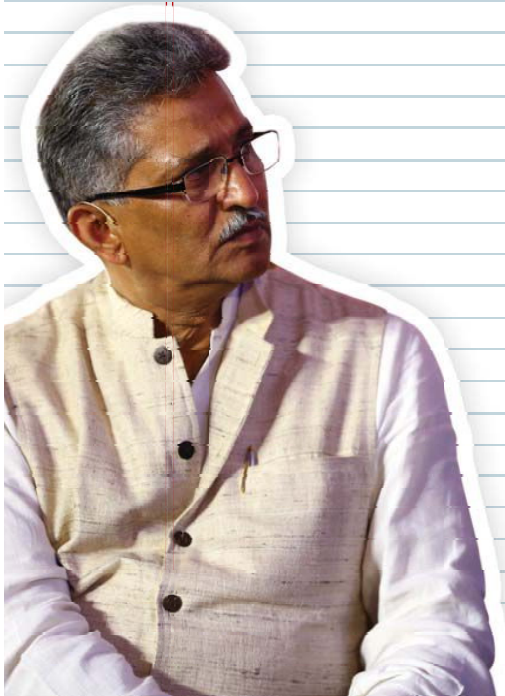
When customers have to wait needlessly or face ignorance and/or inefficiency when shopping is when they decide to migrate, either to e-tail or to another brand. Today, a customer need not give a second thought to that migration because there is more than enough competition offering the same products at more or less the same prices. Gone are the days when providing a positive retail customer experience was commendable; now, it's a vital pre-requisite. Going beyond a good retail customer experience, retailers need to design and implement coherent retail service models if they seek to set themselves apart.

That being said, there are some retailers who have succeeded in evolving with the tastes, desires and expectations of today's discerning and experiential customer. The annual TRRAIN Retail Awards have, over the years, recognised a multitude of these efforts, celebrating professionals at a national level who have gone that extra mile for customers on behalf of the companies and brands they work for. This has led to the creation of valuable case studies and brand new benchmarks for retail Customer Service Excellence in India.

In this article, we speak to a few highly successful retail CEOs whose companies' employees have won numerous accolades at the TRRAIN Retail Awards. Sanjay Behl - CEO at Lifestyle Business, Raymond Ltd., Avani Davda - Managing Director at Godrej Nature's Basket, Kabir Lumba - Managing Director at Lifestyle International Pvt. Ltd, Ramesh Menon - Hypercity Retail (India) Ltd. and Venu Nair - Managing Director and Board Member at Marks and Spencer India share their outlook on the role Customer Service Excellence plays as a differentiator in modern retail, the challenges they face in its implementation and its transcendence from mere policy to firmly rooting itself in the very DNA of their organizations.

As the Founder of TRRAIN and former Managing Director & CEO of Shoppers Stop, few individuals understand the nature of Customer Service Excellence and the pivotal role it plays in retail today more than B. S. Nagesh. Here are a few words he shared with us on the subject





B. S. Nagesh, Founder TRRAIN

A few weeks ago, I purchased a new mobile and decided to visit a small shop in seven bungalows, Versova, Mumbai to buy a scratch guard for the screen. I was carrying my old mobile with me as well. The sales associate took my old mobile first and installed the scratch guard with perfect skill and also sold me a case for the same. My mobile looked brand new with just rupees 750 investment. (I was wondering why I even bought a new expensive handset!). When I showed him the new mobile, he looked at the same and said that he has the screen guard but does not have the expertise to install so I should look at an alternate shop. He also gave me the name of the shop. Great services with care and concern for the customer. Where can you see such transparency and honesty even at the cost of foregoing business?

I realized that you could deliver the best service under two circumstances:

- >> Being a servant (All of us are servants at different levels in our hierarchy) and serving for livelihood under monetary compulsion or fear and insecurity of losing/retaining the job.
- >> Passion for what you are doing and love and care for your customer.
- >> In the first instance we see transactional service delivery and never building a relationship for life. Whereas, when you are building an organization with people full of care and love, you are building a life-long customer. We need to inculcate and build a retail organization that is customer centric.

In my experience there are two things which are a must to build a customer centric retail organization

- >> Recruiting the right kind of people at all levels. It is important to check on what they care for, what excites them and finally what will make them feel proud of their existence.
- >> Leaders have to believe in a customer centric organization, walk the talk and build a team and organization wherein values and culture are key foundations of the organization.

Our white paper published in association with AIMIA has clearly shown that their parents and school teachers at the primary school level have influenced associates who have won the awards. For our TRRAIN Award winners excelling in delivering customer service and going beyond the call of duty was very natural. In fact when I asked them about the same they said, "I Just did it."

In the last 5 years of organizing TRRAIN Retail Awards for customer service excellence, it has become evident that we get more and more entries from organizations where creating customer experiences and delivering great service is part of the DNA of the retailer. HR departments are keen to send their participation, they are anxious to know whether their employees are among the finalists, they participate and attend the awards; they get disappointed when their employees do not win. In some cases, they call back to check why their associates did not win awards, what can they do to improve etc. This really shows how passionate the company is about customer service.

I commend the commitment of the retail leaders, spirit of the HR team and the passion of retail associates who have been recognized in the last 5 years of TRRAIN Retail awards.

Now that the undeniable need for Customer Service Excellence has been unequivocally established, let us understand how some of India's most illustrious retail CEOs perceive it within the modern retail landscape.



WHAT IS YOUR DEFINITION OF CUSTOMER SERVICE EXCELLENCE?

★ **SANJAY BEHL, CEO, LIFESTYLE BUSINESS, RAYMOND LTD.**

Customer Service Excellence is consistently meeting or exceeding customer expectations and staying consumed with creation of delightful experiences throughout the customer lifecycle. This is possible only when we put 'customer' at the centre of our businesses and create an enabling organisational eco-system of products, services and experiential interfaces with the sole objective of delighting

our customers through a profitable business model. Its purview is not limited to just addressing the visible needs and expectations, but also meeting any latent or passive needs, and proactively anticipating any new behaviour shaping possibilities. If done well, customer service excellence can potentially be amongst the most significant, relevant, sustainable and viable strategic differentiators for any organisation.

However, it is not easy to achieve and execute a robust customer service excellence model, consistently and viably, even in relatively simple product and service categories. Any Customer Service Excellence strategy must cover all the direct and indirect customer touch points, seamlessly transcending both physical and digital spaces, with an objective to deliver a superior, consistent and unique sensorial experience across elements.

★ **AVANI DAVDA, MANAGING DIRECTOR, GODREJ NATURE'S BASKET**

Excellent and consistent customer service is the foundation of any successful business. Customer service is, in fact, a key point of competitive differentiation. True customer engagement requires seeing

the big picture as well as having a handle on the daily details that truly make a difference. At the core of everything that Nature's Basket does is the customer. Processes within the organization and across the front end

have been refined such that customer service, convenience and satisfaction are maximized across all touch points at all times and are recognized by consumers as decisively different than other retailers.

★ **KABIR LUMBA, MANAGING DIRECTOR, LIFESTYLE INTERNATIONAL PVT. LTD.**

Customer Service is integral to retail experience. Excellent customer service is about keeping the entire shopping process for a customer simple. It is not just about people but also about an organisation's philosophy, its processes and how it gets translated on the floor. For us, speaking from a customer's view point, excellence in customer service translates to an effortless shopping experience for a customer that is joyful and memorable.

★ **RAMESH MENON, HYPERCITY RETAIL (INDIA) LTD.**

We define it by our customer promises i.e. the six pillars we stand by when it comes to customer experience within our stores, namely, Hyper Range, Hyper Fresh, Hyper Exclusives, Hyper Savings, Hyper Speed and Hyper Convenience, the first three being motivational factors for visiting our

store and the last three being hygiene factors (factors in the absence of which our customer wouldn't come back). It starts with a sharp definition of who our customer is - 25 to 35 year old, home maker/working professional, cosmopolitan, aspirational, aware and exposed, possibly well-travelled and

largely digitally aware - and catering to her every need through the range, assortment and store experience. It is then about living up to our promises every day and therefore making sure that we give her adequate reason to keep coming back and to recommend us to others.

★ **venu Nair, MANAGING DIRECTOR & BOARD MEMBER, MARKS & SPENCER INDIA**

Customer Service Excellence is a commitment to delivering exceptional levels of service each and every time our customers shop with us. This starts with a friendly welcome when the customer enters the store and being readily available to help and give knowledgeable advice. It's also about ensuring that we listen carefully to customers' feedback and do our best to service their requirements.



WHAT ARE YOUR TOP 3 FOCUS AREAS TO ENSURE THAT CUSTOMER SERVICE EXCELLENCE IS DELIVERED CONSISTENTLY ACROSS THE ORGANIZATION? WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES?

★ **SANJAY BEHL, CEO, LIFESTYLE BUSINESS, RAYMOND LTD.**

Given that retail interface, both physical and digital, along with front-end sales teams are the primary custodians of customer interface involving Raymond product and service brands, most 'Customer Service Excellence' efforts have to converge here. So while we are investing in relevant technology platforms to enhance our retail store and digital interfaces, we also stay equally committed to anchor the customer service excellence model to our frontend retail staff.

Enabling and Empowering retail store staff: This is amongst the foremost focus areas at Raymond. We have institutionalized a store staff training, assessment and certification framework to ensure up-gradation of functional and behavioural skills required by them to excel in their jobs. Furthermore, through a comprehensive 'delegation of authority' framework, we have successfully decentralized most of the customer interface and experience impacting decision-making at the front end store level. Simple areas of

operative flexibility like promotional budgeting, discount slabs, loyalty program value-adds, complaint resolution authority or cash refunds etc. have been delegated almost entirely to the store team level. Commensurate with their enhanced role, we have re-designated our retail store heads as 'Business Managers'. In addition, we have launched an extremely progressive and fully transparent career progression plan for all our retail staff.

Uplifting and Contemporizing customer experience at stores:

We continue to make aggressive investments for renovating our retail stores, making them more appealing and relevant for today's customers. We are working on rejuvenating and standardizing all sensorial experiences for customers, not restricted to just visual and audio senses. While doing so, we have taken every effort to customize and differentiate store experience, keeping regional and local sensitivities in mind, while staying consistent with the core ethos of our brands.

Building world-class capabilities on the Digital and CRM front: We recently concluded the launch of an integrated 'Raymond Rewards' loyalty program wherein all our portfolio brands - Raymond, Park Avenue, Color Plus and Parx - have come under a unified CRM platform. Apart from enhancing the customer deliverables in areas of curated content and fashion advisory, this consolidation will enable our customers across our brands to redeem earned points on any brand of their choice within our portfolio, and across any of our 1000 retail stores spanning 400 cities in India, or through a digital interface.

The key challenge in delivering a consistent, high quality and profitable customer experience model is the ever-evolving technology and its role in shaping customer experiences and expectations - the pace of change can dilute or dampen efficacy of existing processes and tools. Another key risk is the accelerating advent of new-age business models like fast fashion specialty retailers or pure play discount based e-commerce players, who have the potential to disrupt the prevailing premise itself of customer service.

★ **AVANI DAVDA, MANAGING DIRECTOR, GODREJ NATURE'S BASKET**

The 3 focus areas or Cs of customer satisfaction are consistency, consistency, consistency. It sounds simple but consistency is the secret ingredient to making customers happy. However, it's difficult to get right and requires top-leadership attention. At Nature's Basket, our approach to customer service excellence is neither limited to one individual nor one team. It extends to the DNA of the entire organization and encompasses multiple processes including:

- Selection of products
- Staff selection, etiquette

enhancement & training to make them consumer champions

- Everyday instances where our staff go beyond the call of duty to offer exceptional and 'wow moments' to consumers
- Planned Consumer Engagement & Educational Activities
- In Store processes, Services & Service Levels for consumers
- Complaint resolution and customer service
- Loyalty program

Customer service excellence cannot be achieved in the short-term, nor

can you ever truly say that you have 'achieved' excellence because it's a journey not a destination; the quest for excellence will mean that you are constantly pushing the bar to get even better at what you do. And that is one of the biggest challenges. This journey clearly requires a great deal of commitment from the entire organization. That is probably the real challenge in seeking to strive for service excellence: how can you get all your employees to really care, to really want to go that extra mile, to really believe in what you are trying to achieve?

★ **KABIR LUMBA, MANAGING DIRECTOR, LIFESTYLE INTERNATIONAL PVT. LTD.**

For us, the 3 focus areas are:

1. Simplification/Automation of Processes
2. Orienting People to deliver a consistent experience
3. Creating a Retail Experience that serves customer needs.

Simplification/Automation of Processes

Over the years, we have undertaken several initiatives to make our processes more customer friendly. For example, when customers need to alter their garments, we have an automated system that alerts the customers through an SMS once the alteration is done. This allows the customer to be in the vicinity of the store rather than wait for the garments. Another example of customer convenience is our card-less loyalty programme 'Landmark Rewards' – which is one of the

largest loyalty programme in India. All that the customer needs to remember is their mobile number to avail of all the programme benefits. We have several such process enhancements that are aimed at delivering customer convenience.

Orienting People

Orienting People is the most important constituent of delivering excellent customer service. From greeting the customers as they enter the store to making positive eye contact and ensuring that they are available to assist customers without hindering their experience, these are the critical components of our training programmes. Product knowledge for specific categories and an awareness of fashion trends are also important aspects. Our in-house

application 'Stylus' empowers our people with information pertaining to products, promotions and availability of sizes. With the power of this information on their mobile phones, our people are able to serve our customers well.

The Retail Experience

We take immense pride in our stores. The customer is central to our store design philosophy and we take immense care to ensure that every aspect of the store design keeps customer convenience as key priority. These include location of trial rooms, billing counters, and other customer conveniences that include one-stop customer service desk. Visual Merchandising helps in aiding customers by highlighting season's key trends.

★ **RAMESH MENON, HYPERCITY RETAIL (INDIA) LTD.**

The top three focus areas as far as we are concerned are range and assortment, in store convenience and ease of navigation and most importantly, cash till experience. We try to design our stores to ensure we deliver these, recognising fully well

that our customer expects to get this at our stores vis-à-vis the experience she expects from other stores. The challenge is always to keep our range and assortment a few steps ahead of what our aware, well-travelled, cosmopolitan and aspirational customer

wants or needs, and to make sure she gets what she wants every time. The other associated challenge is always to ensure our associates are aware too and that they know what we are selling and are able to assist the customer, where needed, in finding what she wants.

★ **YENU NAIR, MANAGING DIRECTOR & BOARD MEMBER, MARKS & SPENCER INDIA**

We believe the three factors that determine customer service excellence are:

1. Employee Engagement
2. Training and Development and
3. Innovations based on insight

We know customers are looking for knowledgeable, friendly, helpful advice when they visit our stores and our employees really bring to life the M&S experience for customers in India, making it imperative for us to keep them engaged and motivated. Through employee engagement, we encourage team conversations on how M&S can go the extra mile and share new ideas

that will help us deliver an even better customer experience. In addition to that, we offer them a combination of in-store learning and information sharing to equip them with the skills and understanding to meet and exceed customer expectations. For example, training and buying teams hold specific training sessions for service, soft skills, latest trends and styling through personal sessions as well as pre-recorded short videos to support the customer service associates with inspiration behind our fashionable offers such as the latest styling trends, colours in vogue and special collaborations.

Each year, we deliver over 1500 hours of training to our employees in India. As one of the core brand values, we are always looking at ways to innovate and to evolve as per our customer's changing requirements. Our Customer Insight Unit and our loyalty program gives us great insight into our customers' shopping behaviour – and this coupled with the feedback from customers at our stores, online and via social media, really helps us understand what matters most to our customers and better anticipate how their needs might change in the future – so we can ensure our products and services remain relevant.



WHAT WOULD BE YOUR TOP THREE TIPS TO COMPANIES WHO WISH TO EXCEL IN CUSTOMER SERVICE?

★ **SANJAY BEHL, CEO, LIFESTYLE BUSINESS, RAYMOND LTD.**

Service excellence is not a process or a strategic initiative, but a culture or 'way of life' in any organisation. Hence, if we wish to excel in customer service, it must get seamlessly weaved into the core ethos of an organization. To truly imbibe these, the customer service paradigm must be defined and driven by a top leadership team with utmost clarity and commitment.

The right way to start a journey towards sustained excellence is by putting the customer at the centre of

business, and then re-imagining our business model around it. This starts with a basic understanding of the purpose of our brands and services in the lives of our customers, and then (re)designing all the organisational processes and capabilities to deliver to the 'defined' core purpose of our brands in the lives of our customers.

Finally, the role of technology cannot be undermined in delivering consistent and delightful customer experience in a profitable and cost-

effective way, especially in today's context of customer journey across physical and digital mediums.

However, shortening technology life cycles and the rapidly growing big data bubble together pose high risk of obsolescence to significant capital investments in customer service platforms. So, it is bit of a 'Catch 22' paradox that needs to be manoeuvred smartly by the leadership team.

★ **AVANI DAVDA, MANAGING DIRECTOR, GODREJ NATURE'S BASKET**

Know your customers

Great interactions begin with knowing your customers' wants and needs. Customers love personalization.

Think long term - A customer is for life

Think long term when dealing with customers. By keeping customers happy, they will be loyal and through word of mouth, will do the marketing for you.

Go the extra mile

Going the extra mile will not only result in an indebted and happy customer, it can also go a long way in terms of keeping yourself on their radar for future business.

At Nature's Basket, we have identified the need to share our expertise on international cuisine with our consumers in a friendly way. This

we felt, would also elevate the brand from being a mere grocer to being part of an extended family or a friend. The role of the front end in achieving this is critical. The HR team, Product team and Marketing teams take on the role of tutors and mentors to impart both product knowledge, sampling expertise as well as consumer engagement skills to the operating staff.

★ **KABIR LUMBA, MANAGING DIRECTOR, LIFESTYLE INTERNATIONAL PVT LTD**

Excelling in customer service is no longer an option but essential to retain and grow one's franchise. Top 3 tips would be- (1)Keep processes simple (2)Customer Convenience in everything you do – from store design to visual merchandising and promotions (3) Orient people towards a 'Service' mind-set.

★ **RAMESH MENON, HYPERCITY RETAIL (INDIA) LTD.**

The single biggest advice would be to first decide, sharply define and understand who the target customer is and then make sure we serve her needs single-mindedly, not getting side-tracked by what competitors, imagined or otherwise, are doing. Track the customer and listen constantly. Measure her recommendation scores and keep acting to make sure she is happy to keep coming back and be an advocate, telling others too.

★ **venu nair, MANAGING DIRECTOR & BOARD MEMBER, MARKS & SPENCER INDIA**

My three tips for customer service excellence are: 1. Put the customer at the heart of your business and listen to understand their needs 2. Empower your employees with training and reward and recognize their efforts often 3. Go the extra mile to make your customer's day.



CAN YOU GIVE US TWO EXAMPLES OF CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE/SERVICE LESSONS THAT YOU HAVE LEARNT FROM OTHER BRANDS (NOT NECESSARILY FROM RETAIL)?

★ SANJAY BEHL, CEO, LIFESTYLE BUSINESS, RAYMOND LTD.

My first lesson is that consistently delivering excellence in customer experience can be amongst the most relevant, potent, sustainable and profitable competitive differentiators in any organisation. The reason most of us consider or select a specific airline or any hotel is triggered more by the perceptions or actual experience we have on the customer service of that product, rather than any other singular product attribute. However, customer experience is also amongst the most difficult capability to build and sustain viably – and if not done so properly, it

ends-up being an expensive and a non-viable proposition in the long run.

The second learning I have had is that excellence in customer experience is not a sustainable concept, unless we fuel it with a viable economic model. There are multiple examples to this effect, especially a few recent ones in the Indian e-commerce industry, wherein due to the blinding race to gain customer footfalls within the hyper-competitive intensity of this industry, we saw an advent of many innovative customer service concepts like cash-on-delivery, no-questions-

asked returns policy, no minimum slabs for free home delivery etc. most of which led to 'loss leadership' alley, and have been partially or fully withdrawn by now.



★ RAMESH MENON, HYPERCITY RETAIL (INDIA) LTD.



I think a good example of great customer service today is Indigo airlines. The associates and staff are very well trained, speak with confidence looking you in the eye and are not afraid to do things with a twist. They live the brand promise every day and that, I think, is what makes them leaders. What I always admire is the confidence with which the staff speaks and the intense training that must have gone into making that happen.

★ VENU NAIR, MANAGING DIRECTOR & BOARD MEMBER, MARKS & SPENCER INDIA

The first one I would like to quote is from Apple. I had been facing a problem with my phone and connected with their customer service in India. Since my phone had been purchased in UK, it needed to be taken to UK for repair as it was under warranty period. After Apple's Indian servicing recommended this course of action, I made appointments at an Apple Store in London; it was here that I received fantastic and speedy service. In 2 minutes the technician was convinced that there was a genuine problem, and offered a new phone as replacement immediately. It was precise, decisive and aimed at resolving the problem within the stipulated time. The second



experience was at a boutique resort in Tadoba, near Nagpur, that I visited very recently. The hospitality team had planned all possible requirements for the day of the Safari. While other hotels offered bottled water as take-away for this Safari, our resort went an extra

mile by offering water in thermo flasks to ensure we could have the advantage of cold water throughout! Considering the hot summer days, this was a real pleasure! These are little nuances that go a long way in providing a great customer service experience.

To conclude, it will only be the retailers who invest the time, effort and resources in Customer Service Excellence by building retail service models that consistently deliver delight, individual attention and personalized solutions, who will succeed in making any long-lasting impact and secure long-term customer loyalty in this ever-evolving and dynamic marketplace. 