



FUTURE ESSENTIALS

Four must-have characteristics of future-ready retail organisations. Leaders take note...

■ By Bidisha Banerjee

The future potentially places a whole new set of demands on retail businesses. Today, retail is not what it used to be five years ago, and it is certainly nothing like what it will be five years from now. A quick look at the aspects of retail that have evolved in the recent

years shows that this change has occurred across the sector, not just in modes of shopping and platforms. Shopping has gone from being an activity bound by space and time to a fluid, on-the-go, continuous process that is a part of every waking moment of consumers' lives.

WHAT'S CHANGED?

'Where' used to be a very critical aspect of retail.

Soon, it will fade into oblivion. Brick-and-mortar stores have always been, and continue to be the mainstay of retail in India. Marketers have spent time and money studying ways to capitalise retail outlets by improving the shopping experience on the floor, rationalising display and triggering sales. The digital wave has started changing this somewhat. Online marketplaces offered consumers the option of shopping from anywhere and at any time. However, this is just the tip of the iceberg. It is now possible to shop

entirely without a 'where', via subscription-based shopping, automatic re-fills or renewals pre-set to a date.

'Who' actually makes the purchase has changed significantly. 'Who' shops versus who consumes has

always been the subject of research for brands looking to increase market share and focus their communication on the right person. When shopping needs careful planning like making time and going to a physical location, then it is often one person in the family or perhaps two, who take the responsibility based on mobility and having access to payment methods. Numerous studies have suggested that though men, women and children are all users, it is the woman of the house who goes to the supermarket and makes the purchases.

On the other hand, we have also heard that though women may be end users, yet online purchases are mostly made by men because they have access to credit cards and technology. All that is changing. With the advent of mobile wallets, family members of the main bread-winner can now make limited purchases armed merely with a log-in name and password.

'When' people shop. This has been the subject of much speculation. Marketers have obsessed over when people shop, and crafted strategies to commu-

nicate with them when they are most perceptive or when they are at the brink of a purchase. However, this too is set to change. Shopping now permeates across the consumer's day. People can now make purchases on the go, or between daily chores. Scheduled and periodic payments, subscriptions, shopping on the go have amply demonstrated that 'when' people shop may not be the most pertinent question today.

WHAT DOES ALL THIS MEAN FOR BUSINESSES?

To begin with, it means that companies operating in the retail space and their leadership teams need to

breed a culture of inherent comfort with change. Readiness for the future involves nurturing a workforce that is native to these new ways of thinking. Incumbent market leaders need to make sure they remain nimble, despite their size.

HR heads need to shift focus and begin thinking like business partners. The need of the hour are strategic imperatives that HR functions need to adopt to be ready for the future.

1. A WELL-INFORMED AND COMMITTED LEADERSHIP

Every executive in a leadership position should be a potential spokesperson for the brand. Social leaders, who are accessible, approachable, and transparent contribute to consumers' perception of the company they represent. People trust companies if they feel they can trust the leadership. Technology and social media have made publishers of consumers, and brands are aware that public opinion is now expressed more readily and consumed by far more people than brand messages reach. Innovation-driven organisations, with the flexibility to accommodate these rapid changes, thrive in this scenario by creating a rung of leadership that is aware of everything that goes on within and outside of the company.

→ A common misconception is that nimbleness is easier for small and growing organisations, while being difficult for larger incumbents. In reality, being nimble is independent of thinking big and growing at scale.



► **Pro-growth, innovation driven leadership is an imperative of future-ready retail organisations**

Members of such leadership teams make a conscious effort to be approachable and address individual consumers who have seemingly valid reasons to escalate issues. Prompt and well-informed responses in such cases lead to the organic build-up of good publicity that works better for the brand than any paid efforts could.

2. PEOPLE-CENTRIC AND GROWTH-CENTRIC POLICIES

A truly future-ready retail organisation is made up of a team that embraces change and is open to

innovation at dizzying speeds. To nurture a team that is capable of all that, a company first needs to be nimble and flexible themselves.

Policies that have worked well for businesses in the past need to be looked at afresh from the perspective of changing lifestyles and needs of employees today. Encouraging fluidity of roles, offering challenging growth opportunities, making room for more ownership by distributing authority etc. are policies that will work for fast-moving companies in the retail space today.

The future will see more decentralisation of power and accountability. Large enterprises will increasingly breed 'entrepreneurial thinking' among key team members with the potential to grow into leadership positions. Policies like extended paternity leave, flexible working hours, the option of working from remote locations and promoting contract jobs over permanent employment are just some measures that will redefine the future.

Companies have begun to evaluate and realise that measures

such as these not only increase goodwill with employees, but also increase their productivity. Additionally, implementing some of these policies can result in considerable financial gains for companies by way of fewer overheads among other things. People-centric policies can make business sense if planned right.

3. ORGANISATION-WIDE NIMBLENESS

Leaders who can think on their feet, and take calculated decisions on the fly are those that will manoeuvre retail organisations to winning positions. Controlling bureaucracy and allowing independent decision making to a measured extent will give organisations of the future, that edge over competition.

A common misconception is that nimbleness is easier for small and growing organisations, while being difficult for larger incumbents. In reality, nimbleness is independent of thinking big and growing at scale. As long as lines of communication are open and robust, maintaining nimbleness in

a large organisation is easier than one would think.

There are some rules of thumb to get organisations started. Management must be able to abandon unsuccessful policies even if they have spent time and resources to build them. Once they have mastered this, they should allow and encourage the same in their core team members. Moreover, nimble businesses are characterised by the openness to ideas. Leaders should have an eye out for new points of view, since the best ideas can come from any level and across functions.

Finally, close-knit teams are most likely to be open to each other's ideas and point of view. In the current changing HR scenario, building a strong bond in the team is more important than ever before.

4. SOLUTION OVER FUNCTION

A solution-oriented organisation is a future-ready organisation. With consumption patterns, behaviour, perceptions all changing, the way teams run businesses must change too.

Thinking in silos and relying

completely on precedents will just slow down growth. Conscious, modern organisations have leaders who encourage teams to look at getting the task at hand done, rather than following processes. This does not mean that processes should be sacrificed at the altar of immediate requirements, but a balanced approach to problems with a single-minded focus on solving them with creativity is certainly the need of the times.

Companies that nurture this approach in teams may well discover that cross-functional problem-solving leads to more creative and innovative solutions.

A retail company that is ready for the future is one whose teams are comfortable with the constantly evolving retail scenario. We are in the midst of exciting teams, and growth is imminent. For those afraid that the old systems will decline, and for others who feel newer systems may collapse under the sheer speed at which they are attempting to grow – all I can say is businesses don't collapse or shut down, they adapt, change form and evolve. 😊



Bidisha Banerjee has 14 years of enviable experience in enabling learning and development. She has an unconventional approach to imparting knowledge, and is known to introduce innovations that produce remarkable results. She brings her forward-thinking attitude to her present role as Chief, Talent Development & Inclusion and Diversity at Future Group. She has earned a certification in the ACTP (Accredited Coach Training Program), done her Competency Mapping, received the American Society of Training and Development Trainer Certification, and is a Certified Organisational Development Analyst (CAMI, USA). She is also recognised as a Human Synergistic OC/OEI Accredited Consultant. She is currently pursuing her International Masters in Design Thinking from SDA Bocconi, Milan.