



A service opportunity missed?

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Last week, I went to Coonoor to participate in the housewarming ceremony of an affluent friend from Singapore. He had built his house inside the picturesque setting of a tea plantation! You could have tea straight from the plant, if you felt like it! Anyway, let me not digress and stay with the topic on hand which is the permanently intriguing subject of customer service. Before you lose patience, let me get back to the customer service experience that almost knocked my socks off initially, but left me a little disappointed in the end and got me thinking about the entire service opportunity that constantly presents itself to companies. It all started with a phone call to my wife, who was with me, from her boss. Her boss who seemed to be well aware of what was happening at Ooty called to say that Ramraj Textiles, the well-known dhoti and white shirts brand, had just opened a showroom at Ooty and if we could get him two size 42" linen shirts in white. If the boss' instructions are important then imagine how critical instructions from my boss' boss are likely to be! So we dropped everything and made our way in the pouring rain to the showroom. Coincidentally my friend, an acknowledged service expert had spoken about how courteous the staff at Ramraj Textiles' showroom at Coimbatore had been the previous day when he had visited there. We found the showroom without too much difficulty, placed as it was in a prominent location of Ooty.

The service story

As the showroom seemed to have opened that very day, the place was teeming with people as the strength of the brand had prompted a lot of people to come over. Footfalls are what any retailer dreams about and there was no issue here. In fact with two levels, lots of people, loud conversations, cartons being carted around ... all of which made me ask one of the assistants why there was such a racket. My wife quickly asked me to shut up and like any dutiful husband, I promptly did. But when we went to the shirt section things changed dramatically. When we asked for four shirts of 42" of linen, (I also felt like buying them), they sprang into action. They realized that they had only one shirt of that size and asked us for a couple of minutes to check their depot and at other outlets. Even as I was standing in front of the counter, the cashier called outlet after outlet asking for this particular type and size of shirt that we wanted. It was amazing to see someone who belonged to the clerical cadre exceeding the call of duty. All he had to tell me was that the sizes were not available and I would have gone away quietly. But he whetted my appetite by asking me to wait while he called various neighboring outlets like Avinashi, Mettupalayam and many others that I can't recall, finally sourced the shirts at Avinashi and asked someone to put it on the bus and told me that he would pick it up early in the morning and have it delivered. I had already told him that I would be leaving the Ooty Gymkhana where I was staying by 9 a.m. the following morning.

The damp squib the day after

Having whetted my appetite with superior service far beyond my expectations, I waited for the shirts to arrive. 9 o'clock came and went with neither shirts nor even a call from the company. I was a trifle disappointed because the initiative of the previous night at the store had made me hope, unreasonably perhaps. Of course, he had not specifically committed to me as obviously the bus service was beyond his control. But he had my number, could he not have called me and taken my Bangalore address to ship later? As I was driving back to Bangalore there were a number of thoughts that crossed my mind. Is this sort of initiative, like calling different depots and checking availability only possible in smaller companies? Is service a function of size?

Contd...

While the junior person showed so much initiative, there was no intervention from the senior person. Do larger companies have better processes and support systems to handle non-routine service needs? Did the company have the capability to deliver in different cities when there was a stock out situation? Is there opportunity for old world companies like these to learn from companies like Flipkart and Jabong that have created new opportunities for themselves by tapping into reliable delivery systems and procedures? Can these companies look at selling online? After all a white shirt is a white shirt and it is possible to sell and buy these fabrics online. Is an opportunity being missed here?

Mind you, I have a lot of respect and regard for Ramraj Textiles and its shirts. My wardrobe has quite a few shirts from its repertoire. I frequently visit their showroom in some airport or the other and would like the brand to succeed even further and was just a little disappointed that they had promised to deliver something outstanding and then just gave up. I am sure they are not unique in this. I am sure your company and mine is missing opportunities like this every day.

The question is, are you aware of the missed opportunity?

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