

Brands:

When the Promise is not Kept

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A few months ago, an appalling incident flashed all across social media of a passenger being manhandled - even that is an understatement - by a leading airline's staff. It was shocking on multiple levels. First, that educated youth - India's hope, India's future, with good jobs and assured incomes - can be so beastly. What can we then expect of those deprived of the opportunity to earn a decent living by dint of fortune? Second, there are questions around the passenger himself - someone who may well represent the entitled, arrogant Indian. In airport after airport, we see high-handedness among those of us who travel frequently. A copy of the airline Chief Executive's carefully-worded letter, which did the rounds on Whatsapp, stated that the first act of aggression was the passenger's - both through abusive language and, as the letter seems to suggest, by raising a hand. Only those actually present there can know the whole story, but the video is hair-raising for the worst side of humanity that it represents - potentially at both ends.

Setting aside emotion, what comes to mind is the impact on the airline's brand. The incident brings home, yet again, that social media is omnipresent, and it can be the most dangerous, combustible medium, which will reflect truth but just as easily, distort it. The story becomes what the teller says it is, and that can change shape and form as days progress. Separating fact from hypothesis, or even outright lies, is hard for anyone. There is information, almost too much of it, and our brands can hang in the balance. And so, more so than ever before, it is time to protect brands by ensuring that every pore of your organisation lives the promise of the brand. IndiGo, the airline in the spotlight in this particular case, is much more than an airline: it has been Indian aviation's statement of efficiency to the rest of the world. Looking at this incident, one could worry about how success could breed arrogance. One lesson clearly then is, however justified the accolades, humility is key - and so is never forgetting that if the customer puts you on a pedestal, even if for justified reasons, he or she can just as easily pull you down.

What are other learnings from this - for human resource management, and for customer centricity? There are doubtless many, but here are some.

First off, there is the massive need for businesses to understand and recognise the criticality of context - its perennial nature in the culture of a nation, and just as much, its changing, transforming nature on other counts.



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On the count of a nation's culture – in India, we value efficiency because we get so little of it in our day-to-day lives. In most other countries worth their name, it is just hygiene. But more than efficiency, culturally, Indians value the expression of courtesy, we value the little things, we value emotion. Stickiness to brands comes from that emotion. Efficiency can be replicated if the process is replicated. Which also means that an entire team shifting to competition will take this USP away, especially if that team has been core to the creation of the processes that underlie that culture of efficiency. But placing a premium on the small things, on the emotion of delighting a customer – that cannot be replicated as easily. That takes individuals of a certain sort, and it takes the binding together of talent of a particular kind, one that finds joy in delighting the 'other', outside of oneself. An unselfish approach means making something inherently difficult – like travel in madcap India – easier. However, that is only possible when the right attitude runs across the length and breadth of the fabric of the firm. Brands in India would do well to recognise this. To ensure all the other desperately needed elements of efficiency, to demand self-respect and to never be subservient, but to watch for the little things that delight the customer, and quite simply, to be respectful. Even aware, well-travelled passengers feel this can be amiss, but you have to watch the hapless first-time air traveller in India, who has paid good money for his seat, but who is quiet likely to be treated as second-rate, by both co-passengers and airline staff, only because it's new to him. There, as the services industry in toto, we lack. And we miss becoming iconic in one of the world's biggest – 1.3 billion and growing – and most high-potential markets.

We must encourage those in our teams that have the courage of conviction. Often these will be the people who challenge the status quo, though one must be able to separate those that are in it for nuisance value, from those that truly value the firm and want it to be better.



The second learning is to catch the generational shifts, though fortunately, we do better on that count in the India of today. Illustratively, we migrate easily to customer-centric technology interfaces that Gen X and Y prefer. But again, the danger lies in not recognising that the younger generation does not necessarily have lower expectations on personalisation and care. And it is also far more vocal. One-dimensional views of any generation are dangerous, generalisations even more so. Our brands and our people must bear that in mind.

The third lesson is to always watch out for changes in a business' wider eco-system – because, overnight, they can render any competitive advantage irrelevant. Full-service airlines that offered the advantage of lounges when India lacked decent airports had a USP to offer. Today, I would just as easily sit in a sunlit cafe in any metro airport than in a lounge: the coffee is better, the environs undeniably more pleasant. So that USP is lost. What remains special, then, is the ability to connect to customers, and for that you need empowerment, and you need to encourage the right kind of attitudes and behaviours.

A whole different set of learnings follows from this. Namely, the need for firms, especially services firms that touch the lives of customers directly, to adhere to the most stringent SOPs. Those SOPs must be reviewed in action, they must be tested, and they must be continually stretched - again and again. Not to tick boxes, but to authentically build the desired responses and reactions. No matter how humdrum it may sound, culture is the result of adhering to process. Delight is not the easiest thing to offer. What it boils down to is the ability of marketing and operations to work very closely with HR to deliver on this. In turn, it is key for us to find, hire and encourage individuals who display the softer attributes, including, first off, of empathy. Customer orientation and revenue are often directly proportional.

To return to the airline example, never allow a passenger to be incorrect – but also know that two wrongs don't make a right. It helps, in this context, to encourage those in our teams that have the courage of conviction. Often these will be the people who challenge the status quo, though one must be able to



separate those that are in it for nuisance value, from those that truly value the firm and want it to be better. In the case in point, this could have stopped brutishness from flaring up, because it would not have been allowed by other co-workers. It is impossible, for example, in absence of more knowledge, for anyone to fathom why that young gent wrestling back the passenger from the other colleague was smiling at the camera. Herd mentality can come easily to us – human beings are

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like that – but we must test for the right impulses to be able to rally around the right things. And it is the right things that must be spoken of, reiterated, and then reiterated again.

What matters most is, and must be, the ability of leadership to lead by example, on the floor. You must be exemplars of the right spirit that you need in your firms and in your context. For most businesses, the right spirit includes the clear ability to respect others; it includes the ability to be truly customer-centric; it must include the ability to avoid a herd mentality. India in particular, has that disease, and watching for it is key – as is the willingness to utterly condemn something incorrect. There can be no negotiation, no understanding. The messages for the others are quite simply too many.

Most of all perhaps, it includes the ability to handle crises and conflict – and you can train for that. Beyond instilling values of customer centricity, employees must be trained on conflict and crisis management; they must be clear about the lines that must never be crossed in the management of conflict and detailed protocols that guide behaviours are key. Industry operations are complex, demanding precision and punctuality, and exerting huge pressure on employees. Erratic customer behaviour can – and will repeatedly – interfere with this rhythm and put further pressure. We cannot not train for this.

There is also the wider issue of whistle-blowing and its acceptance - or not - in India's business landscape. Any which way, whistle-blowers have it hard – very hard – and that must change.

Outside of the public uproar on social media, would be the shock that a concerned and correct Chief Executive, on how this could have happened in the first place in a team the airline's leadership has always prided itself on. The corrective steps the airline would have taken internally, away from the public glare would be even more important than the very public apology – absolutely the right thing to do – that the airline's Chief Executive offered.

India's USP to the world is services. Can we maximise that potential? Like this, we cannot. The lessons we can learn from such incidents apply just as much to global businesses like IT and ITeS, where customer orientation, communication and empathy have been weaknesses at a time when firms are rising up the value chain. But they are also applicable to domestically-focused services like retail and trade, which will only expand as India formalises further under the efforts of our government. In the context of customer satisfaction, the old-world order of trust must give way to accountable practices that offer respect, and which aim to delight. Inevitably, these will then replace what the informal sector offered – trust, and the value of spoken commitments - and they will need to be a better value proposition.

Our younger team members across India's corporations have so much to offer, and they are keen to learn. Perhaps it is time to test them on the real things in life – dignity, respect (for oneself as much as for the other), and customer oriented service – just as much as we have tested them on the narrower metric of getting the job done in time. Perhaps the first steps will be taken by showing them how it's done. In that process, we might learn something ourselves. ■

This piece is authored by Radha Ahluwalia, Managing Director, IMA India. The views expressed are personal.