



IT'S ALL ABOUT THE JOURNEY

Consumer experience in retail has come a long way from queuing up to buy over-the-counter groceries, or being offered a cold drink in the sari shop. Finding a delectable platter of free-sample delicacies is a norm today as one heads to the aisle of oils in the supermarket. This journey has evolved exponentially in the past couple of decades. It has its share of woes as well as absolute moments of delight. Here is an overview of why and how consumer experience has unfolded across segments, categories and demographics.

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The retail industry accounts for 10 percent of India's GDP and 8 percent of the employment¹. It is expected to grow from US\$ 600 billion in 2015 to almost US\$ 1 trillion by 2020. A dynamic and fast-growing e-commerce market has also started to make healthy inroads into the sector, leaving no stone unturned.

Almost everything we need is available online today. Name it and it's ours for a click here, a click there, and few cryptic numerals cloaked in asterisks. Yet we like to venture out of our comfortable homes. We want to go to the brick-n-mortar shopping stores. We love browsing, talking to people, trying on clothes, grabbing a snack, simply walking into a showroom to see its décor, striking a bargain, and many such things. It's fun! It's the experience we seek.



1. India Brand Equity Foundation report, April, 2017

The quintessential consumers have been studied in great detail to gain an understanding of patterns and behaviours that govern and influence them. Here are some interesting insights that the research has brought to light. It gives us a grasp over various facets of the Consumer Experience Journey.

THE CONSUMER – MAVERICK OR MASTER

No consumer is an island

Today's consumers are hyper connected. They move across the online world, smartphone apps, neighbourhood bazaars, swanky supermarkets and luxury showrooms with equal ease. The retail pie is up for big chomping bites from omni-channel consumers who are making the most of all the information they can get from all sources. Effortless integration of multiple channels like the internet, mobile phones, kiosks, call-centres, showrooms, social media and others is inevitable.



Rise of the personal brand

You are the coffee you drink. You are the clothes you wear. You are the book you read. You are everything that you pick and choose to be. And that makes you a brand in yourself in this age of social media. Your wardrobe is not a random 'bought-over-the-years and put together' ensemble. Nor is your house a storehouse of sorts. It reflects your personality and beliefs. This is the reason shopping has become an intimate experience with an extremely satisfying emotional connect. The consumers are looking to feed this need and brands that will understand this.

Return of the keen eye

Long live the aware consumer. Ever so often you will come across people in supermarket aisles oblivious to the world, with their intent eyes engrossed in reading the contents, expiry date, and net weight printed on the back-of-pack. If it weren't for the wafts of lemony detergent around you, you'd think they were in a bookshop. Today, customers want to be educated while they are shopping.

Price is passé

Sales and discounts ride the crest of the online wave. On an average Indians do buy merchandise for convenience (65 percent) and cost (31 percent)² but discerning consumers are now asking



for additional built-ins. Value of a purchase includes a lot more for them than just the MRP. The preferences are directed towards highly service-focussed and curated experiences.

Linger-longer Mall Hoppers

These are shoppers that will take their own sweet time to browse. They have nowhere else they'd rather be at the moment. They are information gatherers and comparers. If they like something, trust them to do all your advertising for free. A brand would benefit a great deal by nurturing them.

CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE – A PERSONALISED APPROACH

"I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."

– Maya Angelou

It looks as if this quote, by the famous American author and poet Maya Angelou was written specially to inspire the consumer experience design industry. Every bit of the voyage encapsulates the essence of consumers' interaction with the brand. The laws of attraction come into play as the customer is drawn to a brand and starts interacting with it. The idea is to make this association a golden one, so that the buyer remains involved and emotionally invested with the product and the store for a long time to come.

Like all relationships, the consumer experience journey also has its ups, downs, and steady moments. Getting to know them is the first step of mapping that journey. It may be an analytical research or simply anecdotal sharing that reveals their tacit and latent desires. Every buyer is unique. As more and more businesses understand this exclusivity of consumer requirements, the more they can analyse and anticipate what he/she really wants.



“What do you like about the grocery section of a supermarket?”

A good research will answer this question from a woman's point of view.

But a proactive research will put this question forth to children. An insight into what children look forward to when they accompany their mothers for grocery shopping opens doors to a different world of knowledge base.

Aafreen Irani, 8, insists on going with her mother to Foodhall. She loves the fact that not only can you browse and shop for food here, but you also get to instantly lay your hands on some ready-to-eat goodies. You can see her joyfully chatting with the aunty at the store café while mommy shops. For her, grocery shopping has come to mean 'happy family time together'. This is the pulling factor for them.

However, Dr. Parthasarathi finds Big Bazaar's home delivery option on bulk purchases to be a big boon. He just likes to swoop, shop, and hand over the address at the counter so that he can carry on with his work. For him convenience is a big draw.

Vidyadheesh Upadhye, Area Sales Manager with a leading snack company has been interacting with consumers for a long time. He tells us, “Nowadays people are more aware of hygiene and nutritional factors when it comes to food products. They read the labels carefully. They want to touch and feel the product. This is why you will see that the self-service model is very popular all over the world. It gives the shoppers control over making an informed choice. It is empowering.”

The unorganised snack-market is slowly giving way to branded consumption in the overall ₹500 billion Indian snacks industry. As snacking goes traditional, local companies recorded sales growth of 8-35 percent last year³. The regional brands do offer 30 percent higher volume than others at similar price points but how do they compare on customer experience scales?

“We understand that the supermarket experience involves a lot of walking. It is very tiring. Imagine the shopper's delight when, at the next aisle turning, they find our sampling station laden with mouth-watering snacks and free trial-packs of the new launches. From a brand point of view, it is very important to us that the products bring a smile to the consumer's face whenever they think of us,” the Sales Manager of another snack manufacturer says.

3. *The Economic Times*, December 20, 2016

CREATING THE EXPERIENCES - BEHIND THE SCENES

Creating a flawless network of 'all things nice' to provide a unique and fabulous brand experience to each and every consumer is the masterwork of many. Engaging with the consumer in as memorable a way as possible requires a multi-pronged approach.

It can be embarked upon from a purely Physical platform like creating something as simple as a 'good old sachet'. From coffee to cough drops, you can buy a small sachet of almost everything in India. This is a marvellous micro-selling innovation hidden in plain sight. Nowhere in the world are the sachets as famous as they are in India! It is the most easily identifiable brand interaction a person of any demographic can have with the choicest of products.



Human Touch & Ergonomics is a delicate balance of having well trained staff working in an environment they can handle. The sales staff at Fabindia are known for their sensitivity and in-depth knowledge of the store. “They will let you be on your own as long as you are browsing but just when you want to ask them something, they will appear from nowhere. I don't know how they do this but it's amazing. They always know where things are kept. I have never seen them struggling,” says Anagha Nigwekar, a die-hard Fabindia fan.

Product Innovation is another way of winning over customers. Many fascinating hours of our shopping lives have been spent looking at men effortlessly chop onions and slice carrots with magical multi-blades. Have we all not brought back with us at least one of those multi-purpose vegetable cutters from those shops?



Another way to look at consumer experience design is to explore the ways payments can be made as smooth as possible. Now is a good time as any to understand the world of Contactless Proximity Payments, as it will be the mode of transactions of the future.

Architecture & Spatial Design creates a healthy interactive environment that gives itself easily to consumer satisfaction. Slowing down the consumer journey with show-stopping visual merchandise at the entrance creates an aura of leisure. Navigation design affects the time they spend in the store. The recently opened Muji store in Mumbai has used this element to its advantage. Consumers tend to gravitate more towards the right as they peruse, this insight can be used to enhance their experience.

“Retail outlets and malls deal with high volume human traffic. Safety has to be an inbuilt feature in the premises. Wide aisles, digital signage, proper lighting to avoid accidents, marked exits, crowd management at peak times, staff trained in fire-drills, and emergency preparedness are some things that should always be incorporated from the design stage,” says Pradnya Ponshe, MD, Trimit Rachana Architectural & Interior Designing.

Another way to look at consumer experience design is to explore the ways payments can be made as smooth as possible. Now is a good time as any to understand the world of **Contactless Proximity Payments**, as it will be the mode of transactions of the future. There was a time when one had to have an app or a different code for different payment wallets. The recently launched BharatQR code requires merchants to display only one QR code instead of multiple ones. It is the world’s first interoperable payment acceptance solution developed by the National Payments Corporation of India, Mastercard, and Visa⁴. Most of the leading Indian banks are operationally ready to employ the services of BharatQR.

“Retail technological innovation in the area of payments using mobile phones, either simple feature phones or smartphones will revolutionise the way customers shop, transact, and pay. This holds more ground especially after demonetisation,” says Probir Roy, Co-founder and Director of PayMate, a leading provider of electronic Business-to-Business payment solutions in India.

Time is money and **Location Based Services** are here to save the consumers tons of it by engaging with them in a way that the customers don’t waste time on providing their physical location. These services work on geo-targeting and geo-fencing principles. The visitor of a website is pushed notifications about the brands based on his or her current geolocation.

Imagine that you find an irresistible pair of shoes on an online portal at an amazing price-off. You would surely like to visit a nearby store to have a look at the product before buying it online. This is a fairly common practice while making high-value purchases. It is called Showrooming. Thanks to geo-targeting, now retail stores can indulge in some Reverse Showrooming. It is known that on an average a customer spends at least 15 minutes online per store visit. So, as you are browsing for reviews and comparing prices in the shop, a notification of a bigger spot discount pings your smartphone. You save more money and you get to take your favourite shoes home right away! Guess who’s wearing the new shoes right now?

THE EXPERIENCE OF TECHNOLOGY

This has been possible because of a revolution in the field of **IoT – Internet of Things**. It is the cloud-based confluence of many technologies into one that connects almost anything it possibly can. It is a massive network of physical entities like devices, real-time analytics, wireless sensors, all systems that are automated, housing, machine learning, and much more. This infrastructure of information society is the very soul of Smart Cities of the future. It provides remote access and control of networks. Portals like Amazon are doing a magnificent job of integrating technology, physical spaces, and analytics by weaving them inherently in their marketing strategies.

Technologies working behind the scenes do command their fair share of respect but what unflinchingly demands the eye-popping wow-jawed response from the consumers is the experience they get in the realm of dreams. Anyone who has been to the impressive 3,500 sq. ft. Samsung’s **Experience Store** in Delhi knows what unlocking the mysteries of virtual reality means. A 4D chair with hydraulics mechanism gives the consumer a life-like immersive Gear VR experience. Experience stores are an important feature of omni-channel retailing. People go to exclusive Samsung or Apple Experience Stores to get a feel of the product in totality before finally buying them online or at a showroom near them.

“The store will set a new benchmark in terms of how consumers experience and buy Samsung products and technology. This store is a testimony to our commitment to

4. *The Economic Times*, March 04, 2017

our consumers and partners, and our endeavour is to offer an enhanced experience to everyone,” adds Sandeep Singh Arora, Vice President, Retail Operations & Marketing, Mobile Business, Samsung India.

ARRIVING SOON IN INDIA, HOPEFULLY!

What do Zara Madrid and Ralph Lauren New York have in common? They both have **RFID (radio frequency identification) Smart Fitting Rooms** that will make sure that you never have to peek out of the trial room to ask for assistance. The touch screen mirror gives you lighting options as well as an option to request the size you wish to try. The sales executive receives the request on the iPad and gets it for you.

The arrival of new technologies has taken over the imagination and innovation sphere by storm the world over. Here are some of the other tech-goodies to look forward to:



Bluetooth Low Energy (BLE) Beacons use short wave radio transmissions for creating Local Area Networks that allow stores to communicate directly with consumers.

3D Stereo Video Sensors can provide continuous tracking of people in the store to define their location

Thermal Imaging detects emissions from moving people and tracks them. It is also very easy to install and calibrate.

Robots that pull out the can of beans you want from the aisle may be with us sooner than we imagine. Chloe and Tally, two adorable robots, have been retrieving products and taking inventory at Best Buy and Target retail outlets in the US already.

ROADBLOCKS THAT NEED ATTENTION

Change has never been easy. Its share of trials has been fraught with fierce opposition and teething problems. Consumer experiences based on new technologies are no different. Their inconsistencies are apparent in more ways than one. When a leading international air conditioners brand launched inverter ACs in India, for almost 3 years consumers were faced with faulty PCBs and technicians who didn't know how to handle the innovative and sensitive product. However, with time, their services picked up and they are now back in the game.

Similarly, our experience at a prominent consumer durable store that claimed to have VR sets was quite disappointing as not only did they not have the compatible gear, the sales staff seemed to know very little about the technology. They seemed only to



happy to announce the unavailability of the kit.

It's brave when brands and retail stores introduce new technologies. Changing their status quo is the risk they are willing to take to provide their customers better services and experiences.

HERE'S TO THE FUTURE

The consumer is evolving every day. The fact that they are now extremely connected and aware only means that they will be hugely impacting the way business is conducted in the future. The cognitive age is upon us where machines are trusted to make decisions. They play a role beyond being just tools or algorithms. The consumers expect seamless personalised services and experiences every time they interact with a trusted brand.

The digital transformation of the country has begun with the Digital India and other initiatives. Retailers have to think in terms of providing fresh and proactive solutions to keep the product experiences differentiating. The move of experience design from product-centric approaches to consumer-centric approaches will be complete only when the thought is ingrained at the manufacturing stage itself.

You have got to start with the customer experience and work backwards to the technology. You can't start with the technology and figure out where you are going to sell it. I have made this mistake more than anybody. Our vision for Apple started with what incredible benefits can we give to the customers? Where can we take the customer? Not starting with 'let's sit down with engineers and figure out what awesome technology we have and how we are going to market that.

- Steve Jobs

Infusion of organised retail and robust competition indicates that the consumer is in for more happy surprises. Maybe you will soon be tweeting your shopping list to your store for home delivery. You never know! **IR**