



HIMANSHU SHEKHAR, director, Manohar Lal Jewellers, New Delhi, reveals mantras to make jewellery retailing relevant for the existing and new customers.

Shift Focus To Engage Customers

Tell us a little about yourself and your brand that was established in 1930.

My grandfather Manohar Lal Sarraf ji started this venture in 1930 along with his uncle as a partner. The partnership lasted for 50 magnificent years. This itself shows that my grandfather laid a lot of importance on teamwork. Then in 1980, my grandfather started on his own along with us brothers.

'Say what you do, and do what you say' has always been the ethos of our family and business.

Improving quality and constant innovation are two principles on which our business is founded. That is why we were producing hallmarkable quality jewellery since 1990, whereas the hallmark scheme was introduced in India only in 1999. In the year 2005, we got our entire diamond stock verified. IGI director Tehmasp Printer had once told us that we were the first company to have got our entire diamond jewellery inventory certified. In those days, certification of diamond jewellery by a lab like IGI was not a simple affair as a mobile lab had to be called from Mumbai to New Delhi every month to certify the new stock.

I joined the business in 1987 after doing my MBA from NMIMS, Mumbai. I began the jewellery export division in our organisation

in 1990. I currently look after general management and recruitment.

I am a staunch believer of three things: relationship development and maintenance; innovation in whatever you do; and constant personal enhancement. So I constantly work towards it.

How different was the consumer then and now?

These days the customers are very much aware, demanding and spoilt for choice. Today, consumers demand more transparency in terms of quality and this has superseded the trust factor on which established players used to thrive on.

Competition has become fierce too as more contenders are trying to woo the same customer.

There is a rise in individualism and every consumer wants the jewellery to enhance her or his personality accordingly, and they have several options as well.

Beyond a certain strata of society, jewellery is no longer a financial security and backing. Such consumers follow their heart rather than rely only on the trust relationship with the jeweller. They like to buy what appeals to them, irrespective of the price and the jeweller.

Advertising, branding, promotion offers, online presence and in-store merchandising play a major role in shifting the priority of a customer today.

Earlier, there were very few jewellers who catered to a small, elite segment of society as the country's middle class didn't have much buying power. Then the workmanship and techniques were limited, so naturally the choices were limited. So much so that the same design used to be made for all the ladies of a family to avoid any confusion and confrontation. The name of every lady used to be written in *meenakari* on the reverse or obverse of the jewellery piece.

Today's customer is wise and the millennials and the centennials are more into experiential shopping. In such a scenario, what should retail houses do to lure this new breed of customers?

The science is not new. The winners always learn about the changing preferences of their client well in advance and keep changing their offerings as per the change in customer behaviour.

So the point here is that the one who is alert, smart and fast at the retail counter would always retain a customer.

Do you think the era of family jewellers is slowly fading away? Is the customer opting for other

features such as design, good after-sales service and so on?

Definitely, in metro cities the concept of family jewellers is fading away with the established, old player yet to gain ground with the new buyer.

The reasons are many:

- More and more youngsters are unwilling to listen to the advice of elders in the family.
- Jewellers not keeping up with the times.
- The monopoly of family jewellers riding only on the trust factor is slowly eroding. Trust has gone from being faith-based to fact-based. Consumers now demand hallmarking, certification of diamond jewellery as transparent and trust-building measures.
- As more people move to new cities they look for familiar, trustworthy brands that offer all the assurances of transparency and quality, and if the shopping experience is good, they purchase instantly. Job transfers also take people away from home and it's not feasible to go back to a family jeweller to make small, impulse-based purchases.
- The millennials and centennials do not view jewellery as a safe haven or financial security as they are confident about their professional abilities. They aren't faithful to any particular brand. For them it's all about finding the right piece of jewellery, no matter where they are buying from.

How should jewellers reinvent themselves and in which aspects?

As they say, change is the only constant. This holds true for a client and the jeweller as well. The retail counter is the core research ground to learn about the changes in the consumer behaviour and demand.

There are some aspects which one needs to constantly upgrade: it is important to reinvent oneself in every aspect of one's business – be it accounts, finance, recruitment policies, maintaining the team spirit, constant staff training, and personality development of sales staff, the store ambience and more. The most important of all is the personal enhancement of the business owner's abilities.

Your tips on hiring the right kind of staff to sell your precious pieces. How does one retain good employees?

There is an evaluation checklist: judge their common sense; see their willingness

to get involved; assess their readiness or willingness to learn; review their team spirit; and lastly, examine the personal organisation ability of a staff member.

At Manohar Lal Jewellers, we train the staff and give them a good work environment. Importantly, we give them opportunities to take on different roles, and that means they are bound to commit mistakes. However, as management, we have to learn to accept these blunders will happen, as learning from mistakes is the only way to grow.

Why is educating the staff about gems, gemmology, hallmarking, etc. important?

The best way to win over a customer is by empowering her with right knowledge of the product. So until and unless you give that ability to the sales force, you cannot win over customers.

Could you tell us how important is branding in today's age? What exactly should jewellery brands do to engage their customers?

Branding is very important and so is brand recall. It means that whenever a customer thinks of jewellery, she should think of you first.

Branding is a concentric circle exercise in which a jeweller is in the centre. All the circles going away from the centre point should be well taken care of. It doesn't mean that one has to only advertise. It also means offering excellent shopping experience at the retail counter to one and all irrespective of the ticket size. To engage the customer, every brand adopts different strategies, and we also engage in activities that match with our brand's personality.

What is the most challenging aspect about being an entrepreneur in this industry?

Marketing guru Philip Kotler recently said that for success in business one must 'Innovate, Create and Communicate'. Most of the entrepreneurs face challenges in all these three aspects. While at times it is important to follow what is happening in the industry, it is equally important to find your own niche.

Here's a list of challenges that every entrepreneur should look into: the gap between need and availability of finances; lack of technical knowledge; borrowing at high rates and then coming under pressure to create high returns, which can have an adverse impact on creativity.

Another lacuna in the industry is lack of mentorship. There are hardly any avenues where an entrepreneur or new entrant into the industry can get counselling. This makes the initial learning journey very expensive, ineffective, and frustrating and eventually, douses the jeweller's enthusiasm. It's here that established players can take on the role of mentors and bridge this gap.

How important is it for today's jeweller to be on social media platforms?

Social media is very important for communication, image building and to register your presence in the relevant section of the society. Its importance cannot be explained enough.

Today, social media platforms are extremely versatile and they can work wonders if tapped intelligently. They help in making your presence felt in a very specific way and that too at a reasonable cost. All sections of society – right from millennials to older age groups – visit these platforms to gain more knowledge about a brand before making a purchase. So it's very important for any jeweller to be effectively present on these platforms.

Your views about online and offline business models ... How vital or complementary are these two?

They are absolutely complementary. If a jewellery brand is on both the formats, then one's reach is much more and it will surely influence footfalls in a positive way. The ticket size may be small but volumes can be generated. The online business format is at a developing stage, so obviously it has teething problems as well. I feel that one should work towards it with all one's resources.

In a saturated industry where most brands are jostling for eyeballs, how does one carve a niche for oneself, especially when marketing budgets are limited?

I don't agree that the jewellery market is saturated. Your retail counter is your biggest teacher. Work hard in every area of your business. In the retail jewellery business, there are no short cuts to success. It is a long journey wherein every satisfied customer strengthens your foundation. So the best policy is to keep your customer satisfied by offering relevant and designer jewellery; offer value for money; be sincere when catering to a customer's needs; and above all, work with a servant's heart. ■