



Indian retail staff requires classical conditioning training to act with soft skills

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My British friend Paul wanted to take home a sari for his wife in Liverpool. I took him to a typical Indian traditional store. Within 5 minutes, 30 saris were unfolded and held up in demonstration. Such extravagant, spontaneous selling skills mesmerised him. He quadrupled his buy from his initial purchase intent. He was keen to indulge himself too, so we entered a modern Indian fashion apparel store.

As Paul walked alongside the merchandize shelves, he found a salesman following him. When he walked, the salesman did so behind him, when he stopped, so did the salesman. Paul was embarrassed. He asked the salesman to stop shadowing him. The man stepped back a bit, but kept a hawk's eye on Paul, the customer, purportedly to help him. When Paul did turn around to ask for help, the salesman ran to his boss to verify the veracity of his answer. So what was the point in following Paul if his knowledge about the merchandise was so sketchy?

No sales tactics, no behavioural skills, no glib dialogue

Obviously this in-store staff's training was not just inadequate in facts and figures, but pitiful in soft skills. He's never been trained how to read the face of a shopper who steps in. Nobody taught him how to talk with different types of shoppers.

So he has no clue, no sales tactics or behavioural skills on how to engage with a shopper through dialogue. Unlike the proverbial garrulous British barber who entertains you with a constant stream of talk as he shears off your hair, the sales staff of modern Indian retails has cultivated no speech that can engage a shopper and help him to buy.

In lieu of not having learnt anything, they tail the shopper, make him feel not just irritated, but

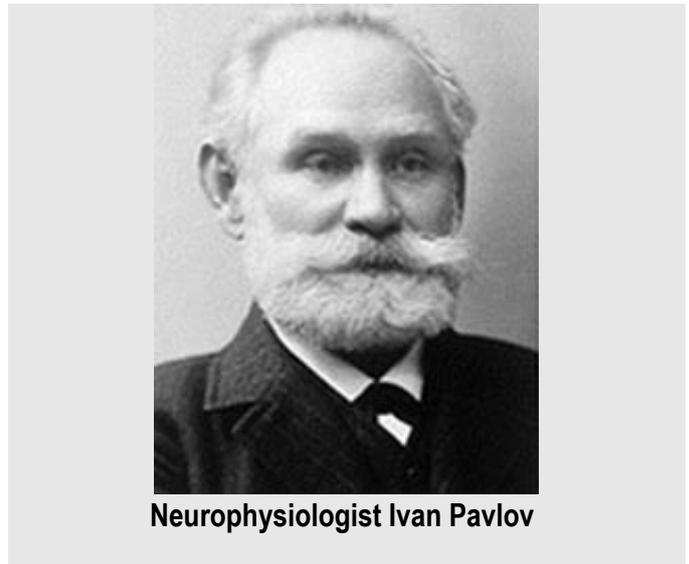
intimidated, resulting in no business conversion. So in such stores you may find shoppers coming in, taking a round with eyes glued to products on the shelves as though on an inspection, and walking out the exit door. Those who are actually buying have come with a pre-decided need based agenda with prior knowledge of the store's merchandize.

Clearly the big requirement is soft skills training for every moment presence. There has to be pragmatic coaching with a systematic review mechanism. Such retail outlets need a service manual productization for training that covers every moment of action of the sales personnel's activities at the retail. An organised retail environment requires systematic discipline for the sales and store management staff.



This is totally divergent from India's diverse social culture. Here, the casual aspect and different people interpreting the same subject very differently is quite accepted. Following a process system is not the norm of Indian society. That's why it is very difficult to follow the Western model where discipline and review are inbuilt and cultural.

So Indian in-store sales staff have to be made accountable to respect every discipline from morning to evening, during the tenure of their presence in the store.



Neurophysiologist Ivan Pavlov

Retail staff need classical conditioning training

Ivan Pavlov's theory of classical conditioning founded in 1927, which is associative learning, can perhaps be applied here. When teaching an individual a response, you need to find the most potent reinforcer for that person. This may be a larger reinforcer at a later time or a smaller immediate reinforcer. Through the strengthening of the stimulus-outcome association, Pavlov demonstrated that before conditioning a dog salivates (unconditioned response) on seeing food (unconditioned stimulus), but not on seeing a bell. During conditioning he simultaneously rang the bell and gave the food. After conditioning, when he rang the bell (conditioned stimulus), the dog would salivate (conditioned response) even if there is no food. It proved that the dog was conditioned to salivate when he heard the bell because he associated it with food.

Reading the shopper's body language

In retail design, the shopper's walk-through in an organised retail is a pre-determined planogram process. Planogram is the strategic and scientific arrangement of the merchandize and visual merchandize that facilitate shoppers' progress through the store.

It's meticulous planning that's designed to evoke their subliminal desire so that merchandize offtake happens. This design using psychological inputs guide shoppers to observe items in the sequence of their logical purpose of usage.

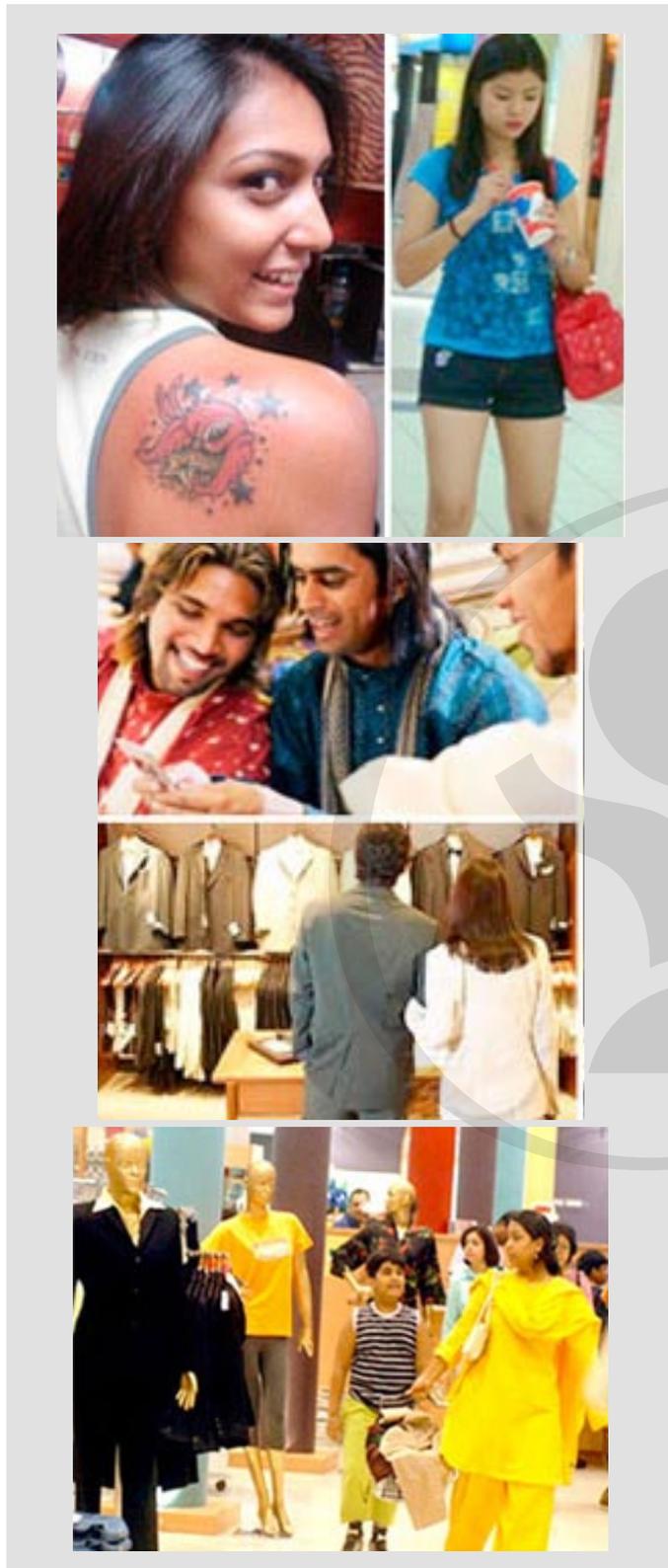
A simplistic example would be placing accessories such as cuff links and neckties, or cravat and blazer-pocket silk handkerchiefs next to formal wear shirts or suits. The planogram can become effectively empowered when in-store sales people display shopper sensitivity.

With soft skills and a sincere attitude of providing assistance, they can engage with shoppers like a friend who advices them on important purchases such as lifestyle dressing.

Shoppers can be of various types. One may walk in with plenty of tattoos, another man may sport a ponytail, yet another could be well suited with a sophisticated woman by his side. There could

Before conditioning FOOD (UCS)	SALIVATION (UCR)		
BELL	NO RESPONSE	 Ding! Dong!	
During conditioning BELL + FOOD (UCS)	SALIVATION (UCR)	 Ding! Dong!	
After conditioning BELL (CS)	SALIVATION (CR)	 Ding! Dong!	

be a shopper wearing the very traditional Indian dress in a Western fashion retail, or a woman with a provocative, revealing dress.



How should the sales attendant approach these different types of people with different personalities? This is where appropriate soft skills are required for business conversion.

Salesmen can radiate a dynamic ambience in the store

What's the right mix for a retail to get quick ROI? The answer is low cost real estate, high spend in soft skills training for sales people, highly aspirational retail design and appropriate merchandize that caters to entry, mid and premium price tag.

How fresh the retail always looks is the most important criterion for the store manager. The ambience is the pull. Once a shopper untidies any merchandise arrangement, everything needs to be promptly rearranged for that neat appearance. When a shopper appears to hesitate, it's the sales person's responsibility to help without bias, to act as the confidant the shopper can count on.



Individualization of service makes the retail great

On a recent US visit, my wife and I entered a large Wal-Mart store when it was quite crowded. She was carrying a walking stick as she'd recently been operated for a broken knee. Suddenly a woman came, hugged my wife with a smile enquiring after her broken leg, and gave her an electric shopping cart with a seat. She explained how simple it was to operate the cart, to drive inside the store and shop without walking.

What we felt heartened about is that the woman brought the electric cart on her own initiative. She made us feel welcome in an over-crowded store. This warm gesture is soaked in soft skills.

Another day at Wal-Mart I was looking for a video camera charger that I forgot to pack into my suitcase. The store keeper looked in his store and electronic inventory, could not locate the kind I needed and asked for my mobile phone number.

After two hours he called to apologize that they didn't have the charger I was looking for as they don't deal with this brand. But he said he'd enquired about who keeps the charger I needed, and found that his rival, Best Buy, does. He asked me to go to a specific Best Buy store in town, gave me the address and name of the saleswoman he'd spoken to there. He said she's holding my charger for me.

I was totally overwhelmed; I didn't know how to thank him. But he was very humble. He said he thought it was his duty to help his customer in the one item he couldn't provide. I did go to Best Buy and got my charger, but my emotional bonding with Walmart increased substantially from this

one incidence of soft skills display.

I've clearly understood now how Walmart has grown to become a \$407 billion within 30 years.



Conclusion

The Indian government is slated to allow 51% FDI for multi brand retails very soon. If retails like Walmart come here, they will change the shopping culture here. International brands are riding high with almost every product or service in India. Isn't it time our organised retailers started creating a conducive sales environment for retail ROI to happen? Today they are merely providing air conditioned lung space for shoppers to take a breather in hot weather when they are out buying unbranded products from street hawkers or mom & pop store.



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