



**HARNESS YOUR
MOST VALUABLE ASSET:**

INSIGHTS INTO EXEMPLARY CUSTOMER SERVICE

UNCOVERING THE SUCCESS MANTRA

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FOREWORD



*B. S. Nagesh,
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I am very happy that our association with Aimia, the customer loyalty experts, has reached a stage where we are working together to deep dive and understand what goes behind a Retail Associate's upbringing and mindset, that they are able to deliver extraordinary service to our customers when they visit retailers, restaurants, multiplexes and such organizations.

Through the TRRAIN¹ Retail Awards, we have recognised many heroes/heroines of our retail industry and presented them in front of the community for the exemplary act of service they have delivered.

I am both delighted and excited at the prospect of a wide-ranging conversation about the make up of customer service role models in India, stimulated by this fresh research study initiated by customer loyalty experts Aimia. Employees whose natural instinct is to extend courtesy and care are the lifeblood of retail.

I invite the retail community to use this report to stimulate fresh discussion about the topic of customer service and the difference exceptional practitioners bring to your business. Let's work together to discover and nurture more of these outstanding people who make our industry so rewarding.

¹ Trust for Retailers and Retail Associates of India (TRRAIN) was formed in 2011 by Mr. B. S. Nagesh, with the vision of empowering people in retail. TRRAIN works to achieve immediate and lasting change in the lives of Retail Associates in India. As a charitable trust, TRRAIN is committed to upgrading the lives of people in retail, both at work and at home.

Table of Contents

2	Summary	11	Through Their Own Eyes
3	Shining Stars: A Few Examples	12	In a Nutshell: Unlocking Customer Service Potential
5	Introduction: The Link Between Service and Customer Loyalty	13	Lessons for Now
7	Never Giving Up: The Persevering Pragmatist	15	Methodology
9	The Breeding Ground for Service Excellence	17	About the Author

SUMMARY

In November 2014, Aimia commissioned research firm IMRB International to conduct a study on the specific question of what drives some Retail Associates (RAs) to demonstrate outstanding service. The contextual background for this work includes Aimia's fundamental belief that, in a typical market environment, exceptional levels of customer service are a defining condition for exceptional levels of customer loyalty. This groundbreaking primary research aimed to enhance our understanding of what drives an individual to go beyond the call of duty and deliver well beyond expectations. We set out to explore the tangible and intangibles around culture, motivation, personality and values that make certain RAs more predisposed to the kind of service delivery that employers crave for, yet often find both challenging to develop and hard to sustain. Fieldwork involved telephone interviews with numerous TRRAIN award winners, selected out of a pool of thousands of award candidates. This was supported with in-depth, face-to-face interviews with winners, their families, and their employer stakeholders.

“Customers don't care how much you know, until they know how much you care.”

— VP, Customer Service,
Digital Equipment Corporation

We conducted quantitative telephone research as a foundation for this report, supported by qualitative interviews to help us paint a picture of what makes high-performing Indian RAs tick. The study, which breaks new ground in retail-related research in India, has two motivating dimensions. Firstly, there is the socially responsible perspective that great customer service is simply a force for good. There is intrinsic good in people and this can be identified and harnessed to benefit business and society. Our award-winning interviewees recounted numerous heartwarming stories that were nothing less than a positive experience for them, their customers and their employers. We hope that this study will be a catalyst for wider recognition of the positive social impact of great service. Secondly, this study has allowed us to reflect on the links between customer service and customer loyalty, and the commercial benefits of nurturing RA role models. We trust and believe that our sociographic analysis of the type of person all retailers should strive to hire, will be treasured by employers for its potential financial merits as much as for its social value.

Our top-level insights, drawn from the IMRB primary research, include the following:

- > RAs share common personality traits of **diligence, pragmatism, tenacity and calmness.**
- > There is commonality in the RA background, influences and drivers: **economic need, family values, a sense of duty and an ambition** to be the best a person can be.

- > RAs are **open, creative and inclined to problem solving.**

We at Aimia found the process of lifting the lid on what makes outstanding Retail Associates in India tick immensely inspiring. The stories we have listened to and the picture they have drawn reinforce some of our fundamental beliefs:

- > There is **intrinsic goodness in people.** Those businesses that identify this and that can harness it can build real competitive advantage.
- > Despite the onward march of technology, customer loyalty is enormously reliant on the **nurturing of real relationships through human interaction.**
- > While our study took place in India, we believe that the concepts of **openness and communication, rewards and recognition, time and work-life balance, and empathy and common connection** are applicable globally. The effectiveness with which organisations can leverage these drivers will have a profound impact on customer service in any environment.

By growing our understanding of the RA as an individual located within a specific socio-economic context, we trust this report will stimulate conversations among retailers over how they can improve the likelihood of hiring potential customer service 'stars,' how they can tap into and unlock their potential, what they need to do to retain them and what the benefits might be in terms of customer loyalty.

SHINING STARS: A FEW EXAMPLES

Here is a sample of some of the inspirational stories submitted to TRRAIN².



Prakash Patel

A customer ordered a pizza from our Domino's outlet. Prakash went to deliver the pizza. As the customer was collecting the pizza, he tripped, fell down some stairs and his head started bleeding. Prakash immediately took him to a nearby clinic, especially as nobody else could help. The customer was given first aid treatment and the doctor said he would be fine in a few days. Prakash paid the doctor's fee of Rs. 175 himself. Prakash then informed the customer's elder brother about the incident and dropped the customer off to his place. He then waited with him until the brother returned home. Mindful of the stressed situation, Prakash did not ask for the Rs. 47 pizza cost. In the evening, our outlet got a call from the same customer, who thanked Prakash for his great humanity. Two days later, when Prakash called to check up on the customer, he came to know that the customer was admitted to hospital as his head had begun to bleed again. The brother again thanked Prakash for his quick action and first aid assistance.

Family background:

Lives with mother, two brothers and wife.

Early influences:

Wife is an active member of social service.

Personality traits and behaviours:

Helpful, social.

“ **Our consumer facing staff are literally our soldiers at the front... at the moment of truth. But they also end up being unsung heroes as they tend to get lost in the numbers and hierarchy. We at Jubilant (Domino's Pizza and Dunkin' Donuts) firmly believe that it's these 27,000 soldiers who need to be given their due, by making heroes and heroines out of them. TRRAIN Retail Awards is the first such initiative to focus on these unsung heroes and celebrate their importance, contribution etc. to the industry. I salute them for their unique initiative and drive.** ”

— Ajay Kaul, CEO, Jubilant Foodworks Ltd.



Diwakar Sode

A customer who visited during the Shoppers Stop end-of-season sale noticed some mannequins draped in dresses made of paper — which was part of our sale theme. The customer was so impressed with the dresses that he asked to meet the person responsible for creating them. Diwakar, a visual merchandise assistant, and creator of the dresses, was then brought out to meet the customer. The customer asked to buy the dresses for his 6-year-old son who could use them in three days in a school fashion show themed 'made out of waste.' We informed him that the items were not sellable, but that we may be able to custom make him something. The issue, though, was that Diwakar could not take time off from the store. Diwakar then volunteered to spend his entire Sunday, which is his only weekly day off, to make the dresses in time. He did so, and as it turns out, the dresses helped the son win the fashion show competition! The customer was thrilled, visited the store, thanked us all, and even offered Diwakar a gift and some cash. Diwakar not only went beyond the call of duty, but refused to accept the gifts, saying instead that it was a pleasure to serve him

Family background:

Mother, father, two sisters, and two brothers.

Early influences:

Father who was associated with social service.

Personality traits and behaviours:

Helpful and generous.

“ **The retail industry has over the years recognised formats, CEOs and other high profile people. TRRAIN Retail Awards are now recognising the contribution of the associate; to celebrate their exemplary service and winning ways. At Shoppers Stop we have always believed in the power of all the associates. That is why we call them Customer Care Associate and give a dignity to each role. We thank TRRAIN for recognising the real heroes of retail.** ”

— Govind Shrikhande, MD, Shoppers Stop Ltd.



Sunil Seth

A customer came to our Goldplus store to sell us back three ornaments of gold, saying he was in urgent need of money for his wife’s heart surgery. The exchange amount came to about Rs. 19,999, but as per store policy, the amount could not be given in cash, rather only through cheque, and that would take a few days. The customer was insisting on cash, required for making an advance payment on the surgery. Understanding the need of the hour, Sunil took permission from our corporate office and took one of the products to the market, exchanged it for cash, got almost the whole amount necessary, and handed it over to the customer. The exchange for the remaining two products were processed as per the standard procedure and a special request was made to the corporate office to courier the cheque the very same day. The surgery was successful and the customer was thankful for Sunil’s help. Today, the customer is loyal enough to the brand that he also refers the store to others.

Family background:

Stays with parents and two brothers.

Early influences:

Mother and grandmother — learned values like respect and unity.

Personality traits and behaviours:

Helpful, leader and has a problem-solving mindset.

“ **TRRAIN Retail Awards have helped bring excitement and reward into the lives of people who are rarely recognized at a national level. To people who selflessly perform their duties not merely for a living but to make the customer’s buying experience a memorable one. A unique and laudable initiative from TRRAIN.** ”

— Bhaskar Bhat, MD, Titan Industries.



Shruti Neha

On a busy, rainy Sunday, a man completely soaked in water entered our store in the mall, and asked Shruti if he could make a phone call from the store land line as his phone had stopped working. Shruti helped him dial the number, and once connected, the man tried to get help as his two-wheeler had broken down. It was difficult to get help at that point since it was raining heavily. Looking at his soaked condition, Shruti offered him hot coffee and her blow dryer to dry his clothes. While he was drying himself, Shruti asked our store delivery person to use his car to get this man some help. The delivery person returned in half an hour with a mechanic, who then fixed the bike. This man, a college student, was very happy. He mentioned that he could not afford to buy anything from our store just yet, but would think of us once he started earning money. He also mentioned that other retailers in the mall had refused to let him use their land line, and he was apprehensive about entering our store since it is huge and looked expensive and intimidating.

Family background:

Stays in a PG in Delhi. Family comprised of parents and younger brother.

Influences:

Father — an honest and hardworking man.

Personality traits and behaviours:

People person.



Shekar Dutta

A young man visited us at our Raymond Shop, saying he wanted a custom-made suit, and Shekar was assisting him. The customer selected a suit length and provided measurements, and delivery was scheduled. But during the measurements, his mobile phone, some loose change and two brown envelopes fell out of his pockets. The customer was in a hurry, paid and left without realising he had left personal items behind, including the two brown envelopes which contained gold bangles and gold buttons. Shekar took custody of the articles, got the customer’s address from our tailoring records, and at store closing, took a bus for 40 minutes to the customer’s house. Shekar reached the customer’s house at 10.30 pm, and gave the belongings back to the customer who had reached home an hour earlier and was extremely upset. The customer insisted that Shekar have dinner with him, and then dropped him off at the nearest bus stop.

Family background:

Mother, wife and one son.

Influences:

He gets inspired to work with utmost honesty.

Personality traits and behaviours:

Observant, sociable and empathic.

²This research comes from the TRRAIN repository of success stories.

INTRODUCTION: THE LINK BETWEEN SERVICE AND CUSTOMER LOYALTY

Aimia's global work over many years has taught us there is a basic difference between the affinity (like) a consumer might have with a brand or organisation, and true customer loyalty (love) built on a deeper, more involved relationship between consumer and the brand or business from which he or she is buying. We believe that the human touch has the power to intensify this relationship and power the reciprocal added value that is essential for true customer loyalty.

We contend that the foundations of customer loyalty are created by the same core drivers first articulated by legendary McDonald's CEO Ray Kroc:

- > **Quality:** the quality of your products and services in contrast to the quality of your competition.
- > **Service:** the responsiveness and training of your front-line employees, and the ease of use of your virtual tools.
- > **Cleanliness:** the experience customers undergo while doing business in your physical or virtual

locations. More broadly labelled as "Environment."

- > **Value:** the prices of your products and services, which must be in line with your competitors' prices, and in line with your delivery of the other three drivers.

Our study in India provided us with another opportunity to dig deeper into the concept of one of the above areas: **Service**. Because the execution of this dimension also invariably involves the human factor, it is arguably the hardest one for any organisation to control. This also helps to explain why service, in a competitive environment, can be the all-important differentiator — a foundation for what makes one retailer stand out from the rest. In times of crisis, when the value exchange breaks down, there is invariably a moment where human intervention can rescue the situation; a window of opportunity to change the customer's path: from lapsed to loyal, from loss to profit. The right actions and the right behaviours at the right time make that difference. There can be no doubt that unearthing and nurturing customer service role

models is a process worth investing in for the long run.

In our research, we set out to answer a number of questions:

- > **What are the common personality traits among our role model RAs?** We wanted to explore the correlation between personality and superior performance in the workplace.
- > **What does a model RA's ecosystem look like?** What are the patterns in social influences? What kind of values do they hold? What are the things that they struggle with and where do they turn for their anchors?
- > **What is the RA definition of great service?** Great service is ultimately defined by the customer, but our sample represents the ones who are highly successful at delivery. What might retailers learn by seeing the service experience through their role models' eyes?

In asking these questions, we were **able to test certain hypotheses.**

Individuals who provide inspiring customer service:





“ Get closer than ever to your customers. So close that you tell them what they need well before they realise it themselves. ”

— Steve Jobs

NEVER GIVING UP: THE PERSEVERING PRAGMATIST

The nuances of great service can be debated, but most observers would concur that a willingness to go the extra mile, calmness under pressure, sincerity, courtesy and a genuine desire to help are commonly associated behaviours. Personality traits are the enduring personal characteristics that support these behaviours that make them occur naturally. The concept of personality is closely linked to attitude. In retail, we often hear the advice originally attributed to Herb Kelleher, one of the co-founders of US-based Southwest Airlines, that organisations should hire for attitude and train for skill. The latter is in the sphere of company influence, the former needs to be there from day one. It's what our RAs bring to the table. It's their end of the bargain.

Our study focused on identifying personality patterns among our award-winning RAs. Here's what we found:

“ I am way too attached and addicted to my work; I feel proud of the work that I do, I never took holidays or days off in my school and college, and even now I don't take holidays or days off work; you can say that I am a workaholic because I have to sacrifice something to reach some particular level and I am willing to do that. ”

Hard Working and Practical

The concept of employment is a relatively simple one for our RA. Gainful employment is necessary for self-esteem and basic living. They know that they will need to make sacrifices — for example long hours and weekends — but they are prepared to do this because hard work, besides being a noble endeavour in itself, enables them to provide for their families.

A Sense of Duty

It's also not just about having the job, it's about doing the job properly that really matters. Where limited instruction is provided, the RA will typically look to go beyond that instruction.

“ I was told that at work, I needed to count and take the delivery of goods. My boss didn't tell me anything beyond this. If required, I could open the boxes. I understood that this was my duty. This one time, I had a suspicion and asked for eight boxes to be opened and shown. This took time, but upon opening, I saw that there were only half the bottles there, the other half had disappeared. ”

Realistic and Resolution Orientated

Our service champions do not live their lives by abstract principles of good/evil, justice/injustice, virtue/vice, hero/villain, and so on. They are much more pragmatic. When it comes to relaxing in front of the television, they will choose content with a message in preference to a fantasy-laden masala Bollywood movie. They are realists who make judgements on what they see in front of them. Rather than inventing or imagining possible outcomes, they think instinctively and act accordingly. Flexible problem solvers at heart, our RAs both seek and admire compromise. Conflict should be resolved, not perpetuated. A nice illustration of this was the story told to us by an RA who suggested to the teacher that classroom communication would be improved by getting boys to sit next to girls. Boys simply behaved much better when sat next to girls and the classroom was suddenly more productive.



“ We all had a target given to us by the company — we had to sell at least 10 CDs per store. My manager had a target of 15 CDs and I told him no matter what the target is, I will meet it. ”

Tenacious

Our service champions don't give up easily. Failure is not an option. Not because they need to win, but because they don't want to let anyone down, neither their employer, the customer nor themselves. And because they are tenacious, they also tend to be optimistic — a characteristic perfectly suited to putting smiles on customer faces.



“ **My work is about customer handling and there are different kinds of customers. The days are based on the kinds of customers we get. Whatever work I do; I enjoy doing and so I don't get to know where my day goes by.** ”

Rational and Optimistic

It's no surprise that a disposition for exceptional service tends to be associated with a calm, rational personality. RAs do not lose their temper. Doing so would not solve the problem. Instead, they seem able to cope with multiple simultaneous demands for their attention and maintain a dignified, courteous and positive manner throughout a variety of customer exchanges.

Diligent and Disciplined

The cautious nature of our RA is aligned with diligence at home. Our RAs are predominantly lower middle class and work long hours for what can be a relatively modest income. There is little practical or pecuniary room for spontaneity. While all the i's need to be dotted in the workplace, every minute and every penny needs to be accounted for at home.

“ **My retail-based job and the timing is such that I get no time to do any of my personal jobs. That is why I try hard to complete my pending jobs on a Monday. Taking time out is very difficult.** ”

THE BREEDING GROUND FOR SERVICE EXCELLENCE

If our award-winning RA is a calm, meticulous, proud problem solver who wants to make customers happy and who doesn't give up easily, what is it that drives them to be this way? If these are the qualities that modern retailers look for and need in their front line, then it's helpful to understand if there are any correlating demographic patterns and social and cultural influences that have influenced the RA journey. Finding and recognising these patterns will make it easier for retailers to uncover and nurture their service stars of tomorrow.

These are the commonalities we discovered:

Family Duty

Our demographic analysis of our sample suggests that many of our RAs were forced to sacrifice their own educational and career aspirations, because of the need to supplement the family income at an early stage. This may have been due to any untimely death in the family or simply a by-product of a lower middle class upbringing, where pressure to contribute financially comes at an early age. Selflessness, in some cases, is more or less mandatory. For men, the social expectation of carrying the financial responsibility of the household can be particularly acute.

Many see it as their duty to provide for and take care of their next of kin, even if that means the amount of time they get to spend with them is sometimes limited. The responsibility ethic and the need to take care of the family appears to be aligned with a democratic approach to decision-making. As stated earlier, our RAs are not risk takers. Their ideal solution is one that benefits all stakeholders, rather than a single individual. Hence all major financial decisions are likely to be discussed with others, particularly elder family members.

“ **My responsibilities increased four times after my father expired and I was also newly married — but everyone in the family got together and resolved the situation.** ”

“ **I was really passionate about volleyball but I knew that my dad has a handicap and there would be no one to work in our shop. I was young at that time and it was shameful for me that my dad was working and I was playing games — it used to hurt me.** ”

“ **The biggest challenge in my life today is the studies of my children. It takes effort. The first desire was to make them study in a good school. With God's grace that happened. We also have to pay tuition. They are in primary classes now; we will see when they come to higher (secondary) classes.** ”

Value Education

Government-run school education was most prevalent among the RAs across their childhood. The general lack of discipline, interest and care on the part of school authorities appears to have fostered a dismissive attitude towards education, resulting in many RAs failing to graduate from school or having to repeat. Looking back, the regret of not having studied well or for long enough motivates them to work harder today, and value education for their children.

Some of our RAs remembered individual school teachers with fondness, even admiration for certain personal qualities. These did not, however, translate into an ambition to follow in their professional footsteps. Teaching is not the same as serving.





“ **Amravati is a small city, has a radius of about 4km. It is a nice city similar to Nagpur, but there is no industry, no IT companies, but students of Amravati are really talented. So we all have to move to bigger cities in search of jobs.** ”

Hungry and Mobile

Many of the RAs that we interviewed migrated from villages to major cities and metros in search of work. An indication of their pragmatism, the lack of development, industry and job opportunities back home meant that they simply needed to look for work elsewhere. The challenges of adjustment were by and large taken on the chin. No one complained; this was something that our RAs accepted. The problem was the need for work. The solution was to go and find it.

Family and the Work Ethic

It's widely recognised that what we witness and experience in childhood can have a lasting legacy for working life. When we explored our RA's childhood days in-depth, we found that regardless of whether they experienced a rural or an urban upbringing, they were inspired to be the best that they could be, to continuously improve and to never give up. These values correlated with evidence we found of a strong work ethic, empathy with those facing difficulties, a readiness and ability to cope with life's challenges and religious and cultural tolerance.

The instinct for not giving up and working hard leads a number of RAs to continue with their education alongside working life.

“ **My brother is very responsible towards his family and is bringing up his children really well. I appreciate in him the quality of how to compromise. He compromises a great deal.** ”

“ **I get up at 6.00 am and go to college till 11.00 am, and then I get ready and go to work by 12.00 pm. I come back at 10.00 pm and study. If I have to write notes, I do that. I want to finish my BA (three-year college degree), then maybe I will become a police officer.** ”

“ **We all get together on festivals and say our prayers. Ever since we got married, we all get together and pray. We pray in this room and not separately. We pray together and then we burst fire crackers together.** ”

Community

While older friends and families might exchange news and views at religious festivals, for many of our RAs these gatherings were a source of inspiration and motivation where respect for others was stimulated. They were a time of bonding with friends, as well as family.

THROUGH THEIR OWN EYES

Fuelled by their desire to be the best they can be and provide for their family, our RAs have found that retail offers them the perfect environment in which their values of duty, pragmatism, tenacity and diligence can thrive. While commercial enterprises have a shareholder imperative to pursue profit, how do our RAs perceive their role? What is their own take on what makes them so good?

Our RAs defined the drivers for providing exceptional service in the following ways:

“ I don't like to take the company's money just like that every month. I feel bad at times that a product is just lying there without getting sold. I feel I am responsible for the product. The company is paying us for it. ”

Reciprocity

As we saw earlier, being employed is highly valued by our RAs. It's something they are grateful for and in return, they feel duty-bound to give back. Outstanding service is their method of payment. They also recognise the connection between commercial success and employment opportunity.

Building personal relationships.

Our RAs believe in the power of human intervention and their inherent family values and calm nature make them excellent relationship builders. In a world where increasingly much can be bought online, they know that customers come to the physical store for added value. That added value can and should be provided by them.

“ If someone wants a mobile phone at a cheap rate, then he buys it online where there is no customer interaction... What I feel is if he is spending 20k, then he should take full service for that 20k product. ”

One of the keys to building relationships is perception. Not all customers want the same style of service. Many of the RAs we spoke with acknowledged their ability to identify subtle 'human' cues in a customer interaction situation and adapt their style accordingly.

“ I have a friendly nature even with my customers. I do not behave like what you would call a salesman, but I try to treat them with love. And I enjoy my work. ”

Their desire to make the experience better for others is recognised by the RAs themselves.

“ ...if they want a size 40 and we don't have it, then we try and arrange it from some other store. If it is not available in our store, then we order and arrange it from elsewhere. ”

Whatever it takes.

We all know that great service providers go the extra mile. Our RAs know it too. It seems to be hard-wired into the psyche. Saying 'no' does not enter their vocabulary. And they do it not just because they think it's the right thing to do, they are actually motivated by the opportunity to do so and the anticipated reaction of the customer at the completion of the exchange.

Sense of ownership.

Merely putting products on display is not good enough. Our RAs see part of their role as making things look nice. Another opportunity to do more than is necessarily expected of them, or simply a pragmatic response to what they see in front of them? The answer is probably a bit of both. But there is more to it than that. We found plenty of evidence that RAs equate success with sales and a sense of achievement.

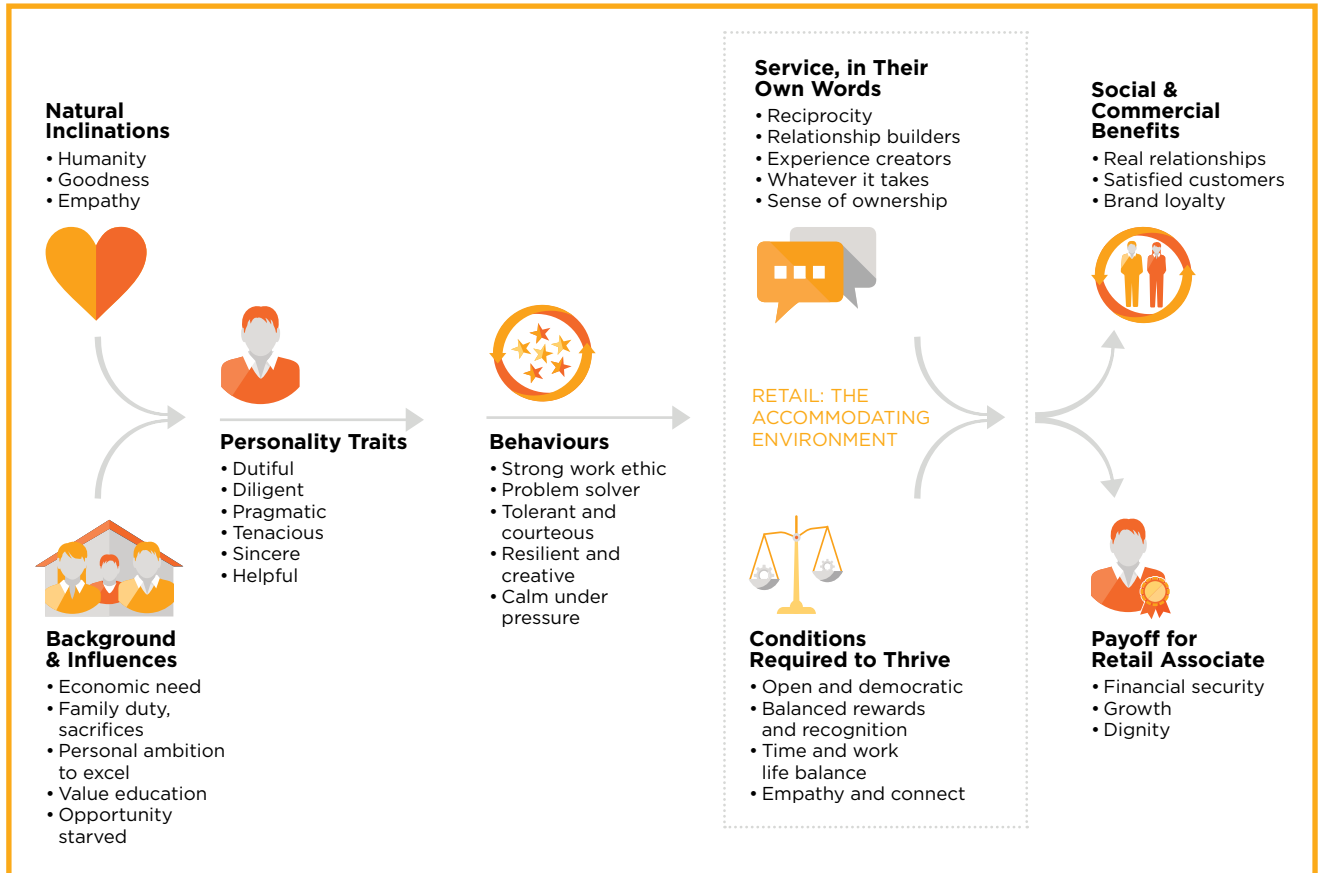
“ There are many products that I have to rearrange so that it is more attractive. With my own motivation, I rearranged the items in a nice circle. You won't believe, there were about 100-150 of these items to begin with, and by the end of the week when I made the report, about 80-90 were gone (sold)! ”

This latter point is understandably important for retailers. Money makes their world go round. The good news is that our RA role models never forget that their exceptional work is ultimately geared towards keeping the tills busy.

Reflecting on the above, it seems to us that there are two dimensions to exemplary customer service that merit further exploration in the future: the one that is humanity at its finest: great people doing great things because it is their natural inclination to do so, and the other that it is the pursuit of customer satisfaction in the context of the brand: great people doing great things because they believe in the company they work for and/or the brand they represent.

IN A NUTSHELL: UNLOCKING CUSTOMER SERVICE POTENTIAL

CUSTOMER SERVICE CHAMPIONS: THE KEY TO RECOGNISING AND UNLOCKING THEIR POTENTIAL



RETAIL ASSOCIATE DEMOGRAPHICS

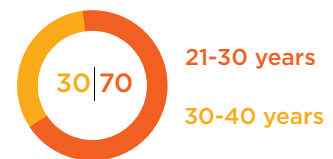
Household/Family Size



Marital Status (%)



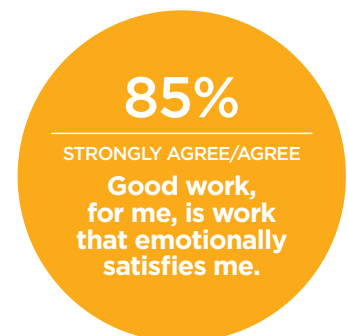
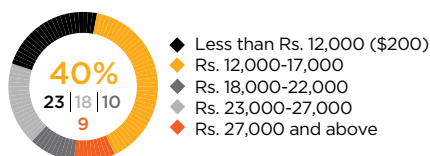
Age (%)



Highest Level of Education



Monthly Household Income (MHI)



LESSONS FOR NOW

By tying our exploration into the backgrounds of our service role models, together with the personality traits we identified during the study that drive the best practice behaviours in the workplace, celebrated by the TRRAIN Retail Awards, we feel we have added greatly to our understanding of what makes service champions tick. There are indeed patterns in demographics, cultural influences, motivations and personality traits. Our diligent, tenacious, calm, problem solver is typically from a lower middle class background, is used to making sacrifices and is driven by the need to take care of the family and be the best they can be. Retail provides an accommodating environment. But, as our award winners enjoy their richly deserved moment in the spotlight, what should retailers be doing to nurture more of the same? The conditions in which service champions thrive is a subject for further study, but in the meantime, here are some thoughts based on what we have learned on this occasion.

OPEN ARMS

A Climate of Openness, Transparency and Collaboration Will Enhance the Engagement

Based on our findings, it seems that calmness, diligence, diplomacy and thoroughness in the workplace has roots in similar family values and role models. The RA's family unit appears to function with a certain degree of openness to each other's personal pleasures and struggles. In the RA's narratives and their families' narratives, negotiating a difficult personal relationship or even a difficult situation at work becomes the family's personal problem, as opposed to the individual's alone. A problem aired is a problem shared. This finding suggests to us that those retailers who encourage a climate of openness, transparency and collaboration in the workplace will enhance still further the depth of engagement that the RA has with their brand.

A BALANCE OF REWARD AND RECOGNITION

Financial Incentives in Addition to Individual Appreciation Will Maintain Motivation

Our research also reveals that because of their less privileged location within the larger socio-economic structure of Indian society, RAs are motivated much more to care for their families and excel at their jobs. The care that they are able to demonstrate at work is more an expression of them performing their duties to the best of their abilities rather than any expression of a presumed greater role in society. The financial compulsion of providing for their families in an increasingly economically unequal society, as well as the emotional motivation to care for them, makes them want to excel, and be recognised for it in their jobs. Given that the experience of financial struggles has been the most prominent among other struggles through their childhood and adult years, securing a financial independence for themselves and financial security for their families is foremost on their minds. It is why they work, and why they strive to excel in that work. In this sense, it is not just recognition at work that they seek — important thought that is, but financial rewards as well. Retailers who want to hold onto their best RAs will not only need to laud their efforts, they will need to remunerate them accordingly.

TIME: A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

Time is a Scarce Commodity They Value Greatly, So Find Ways to Give Them Time Back

Most RAs intend to start their own business one day. The spirit in which this was communicated to us had more to do with their valuing of time, rather than the profile of work in retail or business per se.

“When I was working in the showroom, I was not getting any free time. I had to get permission from my company for a few hours, and then I used it to go for bank work and other things... Now I have a showroom of my own. I come home to have lunch, take rest and watch TV until 3:30pm, and after that I will go to the market for some errand or the other. At the shop, if there is any work to be done, I will do that, or I will assign that work to the designers.”

Here too, it is their desire to spend time with their families and improve the prospect of a financially secure future that guides their goal of setting up a business operation of their own, or trying for a position in a government job. Our research shows, through multiple examples, that their current jobs make time a scarce commodity in their current lives; a commodity that they value greatly.

Retailers must take care not to demand excessive working hours from their RAs. There's a fine line between commitment and resentment. One of the ways we would suggest retailers nurture their service champions of the future is to find imaginative ways to give time back.



EMPATHY AND THE COMMON CONNECTION

Identify and Recruit the Role Models Whose Desire to Help Others is Instinctive

In their daily lives, the desire among our service role models to help others is instinctive. We see this in the workplace, but the inspiration starts elsewhere. Many RAs are motivated to help people who they identify as their “own.” They do more than their share to ensure equity and welfare for members of their own community in new lands. Those who have moved from villages and settled in cities recognise their own capacity to help new migrants settle into their new lives. This is even more pronounced when they themselves have experienced hardships in their transition to big cities.

It strikes us that those who work at the coalface of the operation, with their empathy and common connection, have an enormous capacity to help organisations gain a deeper understanding of how they unlock even greater value for customers. While highly paid marketing executives ponder the intricacies of the customer journey with their advertising agencies, how much time is spent listening to those on the shop floor where the action is really taking place? Similarly, are those businesses who allow marketing departments to rigorously process the customer experience with their ‘brand standards’ manifesto, missing a trick? Why not talk to your RAs, for example, about how they might guide your expansion into tier-2 rural markets? If there is a problem to be solved, why not talk to the experts?


What we do know is that regardless of work environment, recruiting the right RA can have a profound impact on your customer loyalty and the culture that grows from the grassroots up. TRRAIN and Aimia invite those who read this report to take pride from India’s excellent customer service reputation, share our learnings with friends around the world and help us drive this conversation forward.

METHODOLOGY

In November 2014, Aimia partnered with IMRB International to conduct primary research into the drivers of exceptional customer service among award winning Retail Associates. The methodology used consisted of telephonic audits with 60 TRRAIN winners and runners-up for service excellence, selected from a pool of 9000+ stories and candidates. Twelve in-depth home immersion interviews with winners and their families were conducted, and four structured questionnaires with other Retail Associate stakeholders such as HR managers and floor managers. The interviewees covered a broad range of sectors. Participants were based in Bangalore, Mumbai, Pune, Delhi, Kolkata and Siliguri.

To investigate the context of service excellence in RAs, we administered a three-pronged 360 degree approach to the research. Survey questionnaires were administered to TRRAIN award winners and short-listed candidates in order to scan their demographic and socioeconomic backgrounds. Telephonic interviews were conducted with a few of their HR/reporting managers to gain an understanding of a winner's attitude tendency and potential at the workplace. And in-depth interviews were conducted with a smaller set of RAs and their families in their homes. The home visits and interviews were accompanied by observational research of their habitats and their prized and special belongings, and this allowed us to grasp ethnographically the value systems that shaped the winning RAs.


Questions that we also began asking during the course of our research, and which, with the support of the retail community, we hope to answer in future studies, include:




Can great Retail Associates — Service Champions — be nurtured, or are they simply born that way?

What is the kind of working environment that enables a Service Champion to thrive?

What can retailers do to increase their likelihood of hiring these Service Champions?



This initial research should be viewed as the start of a study intended to evolve and eventually result in a practical toolkit that will be of real value to retailers in the hiring and development of customer service role models. We welcome the involvement of retailers around the world in the next stages.



“ It takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it. If you think about that, you’ll do things differently. ”

— Warren Buffett

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Vikas Choudhury,
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Vikas Choudhury heads the Aimia India business. He has over 15 years of experience in executive management roles in consulting and managed services, venture capital, retail, technology, and analytics. Prior to Aimia, Vikas ran a luxury home store retailer, founded and sold a global enterprise business intelligence analytics business, and led a security surveillance solutions company.

He is also an active angel investor, and an advisor or board member of several large successful mobile, e-commerce, cloud, consumer products and retail businesses. He was a co-founding investor and investment committee member in Mumbai Angels, and has served on the Board of Trustees of TiE in Mumbai. Vikas started his career in consulting in the US, and is an alumnus of Harvard Business School and University of Pittsburgh. Vikas is also a national award-winning photographer and currently resides in Mumbai with his family.



About Aimia

Aimia Inc. (“Aimia”) is a global leader in loyalty management. Employing more than 4,300 people in 20 countries worldwide, Aimia offers clients, partners and members proven expertise in launching and managing coalition loyalty programs, delivering proprietary loyalty services, creating value through loyalty analytics and driving innovation in the emerging digital, mobile and social communications spaces.

Aimia owns and operates Aeroplan, Canada’s premier coalition loyalty program, Nectar, the United Kingdom’s largest coalition loyalty program, Nectar Italia, Italy’s largest coalition program and Smart Button, a leading provider of SaaS loyalty solutions. In addition, Aimia owns stakes in Air Miles Middle East, Travel Club, Spain’s leading coalition loyalty program, Club Premier, Mexico’s leading coalition loyalty program, China Rewards, the first coalition loyalty program in China that enables members to earn and redeem a common currency, Think Big, the owner and operator of BIG — AirAsia and Tune Group’s loyalty program, Brazil’s Prisma Fidelidade and i2c, a joint venture with Sainsbury’s offering insight and data analytics services in the UK to retailers and suppliers. Aimia also holds a minority position in Cardlytics, a US-based private company operating in card-linked marketing and Fractal Analytics, a provider of advanced analytics. Aimia is listed on the Toronto Stock Exchange (TSX: AIM).

For more information, visit us at www.aimia.com.

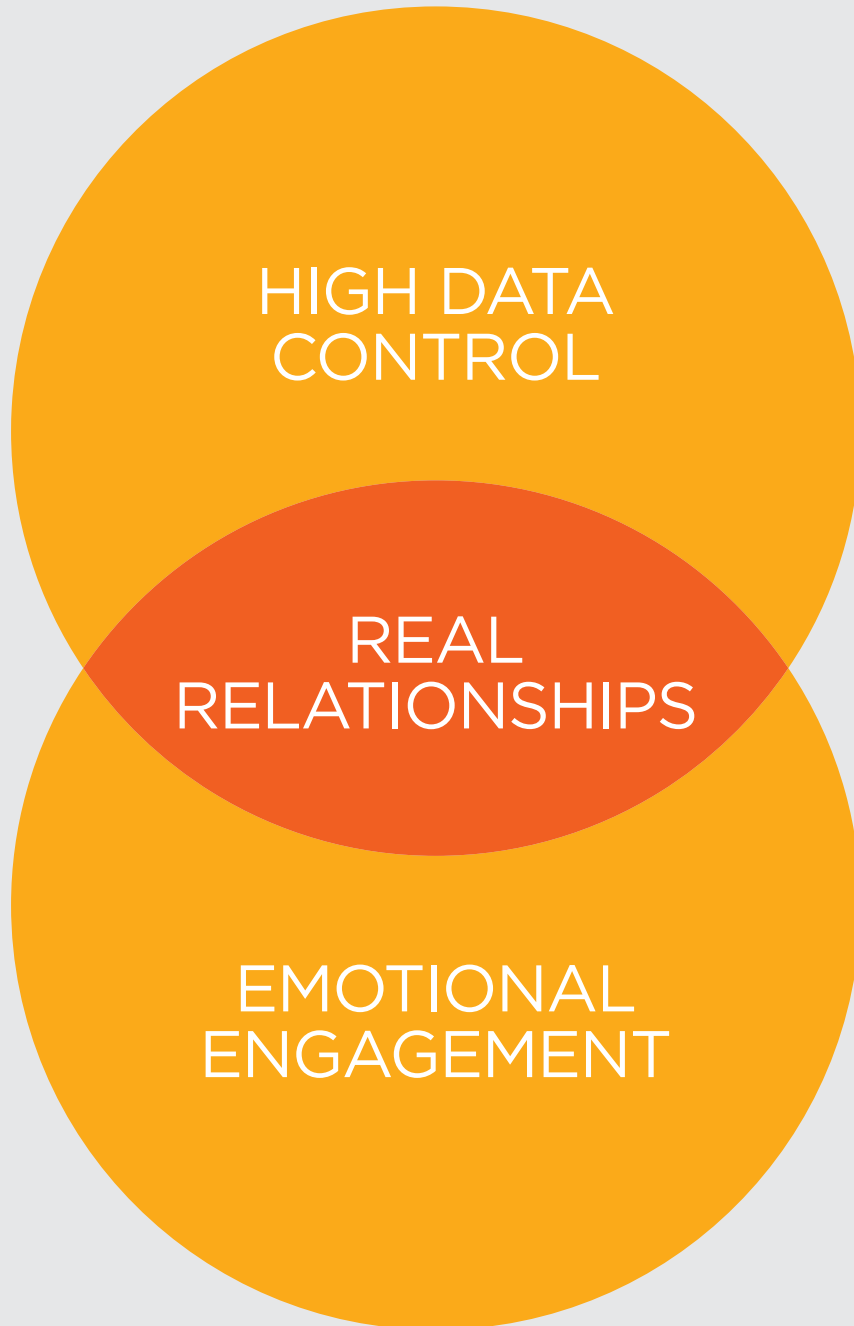


About TRRAIN

The Trust for Retailers and Retail Associates of India (TRRAIN) was formed in 2011 by Mr. B. S. Nagesh, with the vision of empowering people in retail and achieving immediate and lasting change in the lives of retail associates in India. A charitable trust, TRRAIN is committed to upgrading the lives of people in retail, both at work and at home. Mr Nagesh, Founder TRRAIN, is a pioneer of modern retail in India. His career has spanned three decades of distinguished service, during which time he set up K Raheja Group’s retail business, and founded and grew Shoppers Stop, India’s most celebrated department store chain. Nagesh was the first Indian to be inducted into the Retail Hall of Fame, at the World Retail Congress in 2008. In accordance with his personal philosophy of 25 years of learning, 25 years of earning and 25 years of returning, TRRAIN is his vehicle for giving back to the industry that gave him so much over the course of a rewarding career. TRRAIN’S CEO is Ameesha Prabhu. Ameesha has over 20 years of rich retail experience across department and specialty stores, lifestyle and value formats. Her thorough understanding of retail, and her empathy with front-end associates, is the direct result of her personal journey from the shop floor to becoming head of buying at many of India’s top retailers. Ameesha is a role model at TRRAIN.

For more information, visit us at www.trrain.org.

Why not let the people who inspire loyalty for 300 million households, run your customer engagement?



At Aimia, we believe that businesses who emotionally connect with their customers while also offering a high level of responsible data control, will be best positioned to inspire long-term customer loyalty.

For an initial conversation, contact Vikas Choudhury on **M +91 98200 84258 | T +91 2266119900** or write to him at vikas.choudhury@aimia.com

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