

THE REAL DEAL

LET'S TALK ABOUT SALES

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Tom Dawes

Global Creative Director,
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Moderator



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In Sunil's experience, a role in Sales is the first leadership stint of one's career - it is the first time one leads people with different profiles - and prepares oneself for more senior roles, later on.



Balram Singh Yadav

Managing Director,
Godrej Agrovet

Balram believes one should grab the opportunity to do Sales when it presents itself, because the truth is, we are always selling something and communicating something to people.

The Real Deal is our in-house talk show that encourages open conversations on important topics.

Tom

Hello, my name is Tom Dawes, and I am The Real Deal!

The Real Deal is your opportunity to treat me like an interviewing puppet. To ask senior leaders, the questions you've been burning to ask. Today we pick the enormous brains of Balram and Sunil, about why sales roles are so important for your career.

You've got challenging questions, I've got a challenging personality. Let's get to work.

Tom

Gentlemen, welcome to The Real Deal. Thank you so much for coming on.

Balram

Thank you for having us.

Tom

Guys, we're going to get down to the important questions about sales, and why is it so important for your career at Godrej. So, let's start off with you, Sunil. Why is it so important to do Sales?

Sunil

I think in any business model, and it doesn't apply to only FMCG, I think it applies to every industry, is that there are two big pieces, which finally will make the business tick. One is between a brand and a consumer, there is the acceptability of the brand and the product which has to happen by the consumer, and the second is, there has to be availability of the brand. So, I think that these are the two "A's" really that matter. While acceptability all comes through brand building, a great product and advertising, which is the glamour part of the business, which most people really want to be in, the fact is that doesn't exist if there is no availability. And that actually is another very, very critical pivot of the business. And if you don't know this, how well this works, the intricacies of the availability piece, I think the acceptability piece is meaningless.



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Sunil

Tom

So then how does sales make you a better marketer?

Sunil

So I think what you end up learning in sales, really, the first piece is, and especially if you go from the India context; actually, if you want, it could go from any other continents' context is, the complexities of go-to-market are very, very different in any country. And, to make a product reach to the customers requires (a) learning to manage multiple channels. You require to learn to work with multiple, different people. And by in large what you are doing in sales is you're working indirectly through people, and still making your product available. So I think what sales teaches you is the dynamics of how your product behaves when it actually lands into the various layers of the market. And that behaviour of what your product goes through physically, what your product goes through, the way people sell it, the way it gets appreciated by retailers, is all a learning which happens on the ground.

Tom

So have you done marketing and sales in your career?

Sunil

Yeah. In fact, I did a lot of sales first before I moved to marketing. I did six and a half years of sales before actually I moved to marketing.

Tom

And you think that made you a better marketer?

Sunil

Very clearly. In fact, I think my first stint was in the state of Bihar actually, which is the most rural of states. But if I were to just look back, what it taught me at the time really laid a solid foundation of how to build brands.

Balram

As far as I am concerned, I started my sales stint in Punjab, in 1991, when the state was under terrorism and situations were very tough. And I would say that to do sales that time was a tough

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Sunil

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I can definitely say the sales stint has taught me a lot. I used to be very timid, then I became extroverted, I started listening and talking to people, because it is about connect.

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Balram

thing, in terms of the terrain etc. but was very easy because nobody was going there. So I learnt a lot that time, so some of the things which personally I can definitely say the sales stint has taught me a lot. I used to be very timid, then I became extroverted, I started listening and talking to people, because it is about connect.

Tom

How important therefore is it, that we hire marketeers that have done sales?

Sunil

I'm a firm believer that you can be a very good marketer only if you've done sales, and maybe I'll just give a couple of examples. If you've been in sales, the first thing you really know is what is the life of a distributor salesman. Which is the last pipeline which leads to execution. And it's so important to understand the bandwidth, the challenges, the behaviour motivations of that last mile, that as a marketer, when you're even making your, let's say, a product story, which you want to get communicated to the retailer, if you know how a DSR functions, what kind of language he uses, what kind of number of priorities he has on his hands, you will be able to appreciate and then make your product story which you want to be retailed through so differently versus a person who just comes straight into marketing and is just consumed by only his or her brand. That's one example. Second for example, even when you design a packaging of a product, the biggest challenge you have to realise is that a shelf, how does it look like, for example in modern trade, it's so different to the one it looks like in a supermarket, versus how it looks in maybe tens or twelve different types of general trade outlets. All those nuances etc., you can only appreciate if you have been there, done it yourself, faced it and got insights behind that.

Tom

So it affects everything from product design all the way through the communication.

Sunil

I think its very critical.

Tom

Interesting.

Balram

I always say that there are two types of people who should be in the organisation. One, people who serve the customer. And second, all of us who should serve the people who serve the customers. And that is what Sunil was mentioning, that all the people in the organisation should be empowering the last mile. If you see, one of the most competitive sectors is telecom now. And I think if you really want to



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Balram

understand the dynamism of sales, that is the sector. And I would say that this is something which does not happen in our sectors, but this is where suddenly, great sales people are coming out of.

Sunil

I have spent time there. So I have been there in telecom for some time, and one thing I can tell you... If once you start liking that whole, the rush of achievement which happens of numbers, it can be very, very addictive.

Tom

Did you rehearse this before you came in? Because that sounded very rehearsed.

Balram

Wise people seldom differ.

Tom

(Laughs)

Tom

And it says here, that we're doing lots of interesting work, to make our sales systems more future-ready. I mean, that doesn't sound like an interesting sentence. Is it?

Sunil

No, I think we're doing a lot of work. Like, you know this, first of all this future-ready, is a very, very... Clichéd. Often clichéd, misused and very maligned word. But the fact is that I think one change which has happened in sales (is that) technology is making a big difference. And I think the world is becoming... The selling world has itself become more complex. So I think that we are doing a lot of stuff on technology to make the life of the DSR, or the distribution salesman, our field officers, of for that matter, area managers, simpler.

Tom

A lot of people, you know, marketeers who are from the city, find it hard to live in remote areas. So, what're your thoughts on this?

Sunil

Okay, I think it's a job which has to be done first of all, I mean, you have to accept it.

Tom

That's compassionate of you.

Sunil

And this is the reality. I wouldn't like to, you know,



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Sunil

sugarcoat this to be very honest. I think all successful people have to go through a grind in their formative years. And that grind is what makes the diamond shine later on.

Tom

Join sales at Godrej, it's a grind.

Sunil

So I think one thing you have to be prepared for, if you really want to be a successful person later on, there has to be a readiness to take a grind in the formative years. And yes, those challenges do exist in sales, and we better, kind of you know, accept them, and rather than seeing this as a checklist to be done as a formality, I would say that this is the acceptance of it. I need to really enjoy and learn this and take it intrinsically into me. And that's the piece.

Balram

Regarding small cities, I think I can say that for Agrovet that you have to be in a small city to make a difference because our life is there. And for FMCG, I think I would say that in case you don't want to be there, I think don't join the FMCG companies. Most of the cities, the penetration of all FMCG is very, very high. It is whatever the demand is likely to come is likely to come from rural India because it is still underserved. This is the place you will get a lot of time, lot of exposure. There's less distraction, you can focus on your business. You need not waste time commuting or answering mails or making presentations. So this is the best time to learn. So you must give it your best. And the results will come because the opportunity is there in rural India.

Tom

Yeah, okay. We're saying that there are challenges of being a sales person. But what are those challenges? If we are going to be upfront with people and say "Look, it is a grind. It can be a grind. "What are the challenges they are likely to face?"

Sunil

So I think the first challenge will be the physical challenge. You have to be on the ground. And, while India has changed so much now, it's not the same sales which I did twenty years back in Patna and Bihar of that time, the infrastructure has become so fantastic across every part of the country; but the fact is you still will have to accept that you'll be on the ground. And if you're going to do sales, you will be in tough terrains, tough climates. You will have to go through the heat and dust of it. So there's a physicality to it, which one has to learn to manage. That's one piece. Second is yes, sales is a last mile. While the whole organisation is chasing numbers, the fact is the last mile is held the most accountable for numbers on a daily basis. So that's the second piece of the...

Tom

So pressure?

Sunil

So yeah, the pressure does come in, yeah. So there is a psychological piece to it. And the third piece

definitely is that many times you are away from your own social circle. You're away from friends, you're away from family. And it can get a little lonely at times, you know. And there are counter measures, you build your circles. So the second piece is how do you find some kind of measures to keep your morale, keep your, you know, passion alive beyond sales?

Tom

Keep your energy going.

Sunil

And obviously, we are cognizant of that. That we need to create this fun and lightness element into sales. So what we have also done is that we have introduced this INR 50,000 non-metro allowance, which is something which you can use to have club memberships, pursue your hobbies, or any other passion which you want to do in these off-metro assignments.

Tom

I think it's great that we're being so honest about that, I think it's really useful. Do you have a particular memory from your time on the ground that was a really positive and enjoyable experience that you want to share?

Balram

When we started the business, and when I see now, the big difference is there are places which have hotels - in those days there were no hotels also.

Tom

So where were you staying?

Balram

Yeah, so we would stay at guest houses, and in places like Himachal and all we would just have homestays. So you park in the distributor's house. And that was a done thing. People were doing it for ages in Unilever and Godrej, etc. So, it was a common practice because he makes the room available, and you have a drink with him, and then he serves you food, and then you're off to the next place because these are small places, there are no places to stay. But now definitely things have improved. Apart from that, I think that every sales stint I've enjoyed, everywhere I've had memories. We have got stuck because of difficult circumstances. I remember that when Babri Masjid demolition took place, I was in Saharanpur. And we were stuck in a hotel for three days, and we ran out of food. So these were also memories. But all this helps because "been there done that" is a very, very big thing in life.

Tom

Yes, absolutely.

Sunil

Actually, i can tell you... When you finish with your sales stints, there are so many memories carry.

There are so many relationships which you formed, which stay with you. They're lifetime memories. You know, like this getting stuck... There are a couple of instances which I recall from those days. Now the infrastructure is so good. I remember this was in Nepal actually that happened. I used to handle along with Bihar, Nepal at that time. I was on this... The flights in Nepal also were not really you know, so rampant at that stage. And I had to take the bus. And it was a grinding journey of sixteen hours overnight from a place called Pokhra to Kathmandu. And then, landslide happens on the way. And we were stuck on the highway for two days. And I remember -

Tom

Which is on the road?

Sunil

On the road, yeah. It took two days to clear the entire highway. There were villagers around, they came down to buses, and each biscuit I remember, which was INR 5, they were selling for INR 100. And then you manage, in the chilling cold but everybody is there. But yeah, these are memories you remember. But you build bonds at those stages. They make you.

Balram

So this is a different world altogether, but I'm telling you that all this, I'm saying, no information, no support, makes us so independent, that we have to think on our own feet. We have to find solutions, and all solutions are so creative. No management institute can teach you that. So I'm saying that I really feel that people who go through this in the first four-five years, they're all set in life. So it is very difficult for them to go wrong, unless and until they intentionally do something wrong in life.

Tom

And what about women in sales? It's not been a traditional role for women, is that changing and how are we supporting that change?

Sunil

I think it's a change which has been happening for quite some time. Maybe I would say, maybe, we need to accelerate this definitely within Godrej more.

Tom

Yeah.

Sunil

But if I were to look out in many other fields across sales and look at other industries and other companies, I think it's something which is, maybe we... They are a little ahead of the curve. And we need to maybe make it much more accelerated inside. I think very clearly we have to keep in mind that the role is tougher. Given that some of the challenges that we have of cultural challenges across multiple states, which exist within India, there are unfortunately some deep-rooted biases which do exist in channel, etc. And we have to be cognizant of that. But these are not unsurmountable. I think what we have to do is we have to say that every role can be done by women in sales. Whether its a

frontline role. Even in the rural areas. And whether its a top level, sales head role itself in the organisation. And I can tell you, we have got some, while still a journey, there are some brilliant cases and examples which exist today. In fact I think around two years back, we published and popularised this full story of this lady, Kanti, who works as an interim sales rep in the rural most areas of one of the most notorious states of eastern U.P. It is a story full of sheer grit and courage, where in the most rural, male dominated society, she has just gone on to become a very successful sales woman.

Tom

Fantastic.

Sunil

Secondly, I think what we definitely need to do is we need to make life safer and easier for women, if we want to encourage them into sales. And that I think is a responsibility that we carry. We should be aware of some of the situational, you know, environmental challenges which do exist, and we need to make that, you know, easier. So for example, we have this policy now of you know, we have hotels, as Balram was saying, like for men, you can just walk in and stay in any hotel, when you're in a small town. For women, you have to be a bit careful about the hotel safety. So we have actually tied up and created a Godrej group audited-kind-of 'safe hotels' across, where you can just check in and stay, as a woman also when you are travelling to those hotels. I think car policies have become friendlier. When you travel you can just take a car or cab, and just move around in your own car. Even for frontline sales women, we have created this policy that if it's 8 p.m. and beyond, don't bother, just take a cab. Even if you're not entitled to it. So I think we need to do (a) these kind of policies which are important. Second piece we definitely need to do is, which is an on-going exercise, we need to sensitise our people more about women and safety. Because those biases tend to exist you know, that "women can't do sales". I think so that's a piece where sensitisation has to be done continuously. So that we can start overcoming those biases.

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Sunil

Tom

Okay great. So look, that's all the questions I have for you today guys. Anything else you want to add?

Balram

I want to tell you since you asked me, that, let me just pitch in more for the sales function. As you rise

in life, you'll be selling something different. And, the peak came in 2017, when Godrej Agrovet went public, and to get a company listed is a very big deal actually. So you have to sell the value proposition to very discerning investors. What the company stands for. We were being very nervous and I was told by one very senior guy at Kotak bank, who knew me very well, he says "Balram, you're a quintessential sales guy. This is your final test. Now you've sold dreams, you've sold products, you've sold distributor ships etc., etc. But now you're going to sell your company. And this is your big test." I'm saying that all the things which I learnt in 27-28 years before 2017, came in very handy. And I'm very happy that I started my career like this and I loved what I did in the early years of my life. And, at one time, when I moved to the profit-centre head role, I made one comment that "At least I'm out of sales". But the truth is you're never out of sales in life, you're always there selling something, communicating something to people. So, please do that because you will never get an opportunity really to do sales once you've moved up in your career.

Sunil

But one big thing which sales prepares you for, and which is something Balram also referred to is, which we all miss... Sales is your first leadership stint of your career. It is the first time you actually lead people. There could be different profiles. The first time you're really thrown and taught how to lead teams. And that first leadership lesson, if learnt well, actually prepares you for higher leadership roles. One of the biggest leadership lessons lies there. And do sales for, if nothing else, learning how to be a leader.

Tom

Fantastic. Well guys, thank you so much for your time, I think it's been really fascinating to listen to your perspectives, and clearly we encourage everyone to get into sales.

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