

Dim-Sum

A sales story



Saugata Nandi

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By
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This book is entirely a work of fiction and all characters are fictional. It has no resemblance to any person, group or community – either living or dead.

*Dedicated to
all my
teachers and students*



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Area Sales Manager

Two letters of promotion were handed over to the sales team. The words were the same – ‘Congratulations. You have been promoted to the position of the Area Sales Manager.’ This was the first managerial position that a member of the sales team would get. Work would involve overseeing sales performance of larger territories, managing a larger sales team and working closely with distributors. Also, this was the gateway to the future corporate positions.

Sudhakar, a young MBA three years out of college, went through the letter. He wanted to shift to marketing and was a bit disappointed. The frequent tours, the long hours at distributors’ office, the intense analytics, the constant pressure and the regional manager were a bundle of trouble for him. He liked it when the sales numbers reported were better than the targeted ones, but hated the months when the sales numbers were not as high. During those months, the intense dressing down by the Regional Manager, Marketing Head and Zonal Head was a bit too much.

‘Three more months and then I am out of this’, Sudhakar told himself. The congratulatory messages and phone calls

started pouring in. The Regional Manager, Srinivas, said, 'I still do not think you are ready for the position, but Corporate HO thought otherwise. After the market visit come to the office at 6 pm. We will have a party till 9 PM and then you can go. We have to leave for a meeting with the new distributor at 5 AM tomorrow.'

'Bloody idiot', thought Sudhakar. 'He wants to control when I eat, when I poop, when I breathe! I just want to have a break with my family and go to Munnar!'

Aloud, he said, 'Sure, Sir'.

'Are you happy?' Srinivas asked.

'Yes, Sir,' said Sudhakar, feigning enthusiasm.

'The party bill is on you,' said Srinivas. 'I find that you are still lacking by 500 units. You must get it closed by this evening. And collect the payments and C forms as well. Now get going.'

'I would like to run him over with my car at least five times,' fumed Sudhakar inwardly.

'Definitely, Sir,' he said.

Sitting under a large neem tree, in one of the villages of East Godavari district of Andhra Pradesh, somewhere near Kakinada, was Rajiv Singh. The cloth tied on his head was his protection from heat and the Artos Lemon was his answer to the sweltering heat wave in the state. Engaged in a deep discussion with the shopkeepers who owned the shops on the highway, Rajiv Singh was taking mental notes to convince his management that a one-rupee stock keeping unit (SKU) would sell a lot in the region and defeat competition.

That's when his cell phone rang. Rajiv noticed that the number belonged to his Regional Manager, Srinivas, but he dismissed the call. It rang again and was dismissed once again. After the discussion with the shopkeepers ended, Rajiv made a note of the low stocks of his company's products at the retail outlets and made a call to the distributor.

'It's two o'clock and your beat delivery unit is still not here. Why?' he asked straightaway.

'Sir, it will be reaching anytime soon. Actually, the vehicle had a flat tire on the way,' said Qadir, the distributor.

'I had warned you last time that I will not tolerate delays. You are not working hard enough to expand the market, Qadir. I will be appointing another distributor in Rajahmundry tomorrow,' said Rajiv.

'Sir, give me one more chance. If I lose Rajahmundry, I will lose 35% of my revenue base,' pleaded Qadir.

'I am sitting in the sun with your customers, picking orders and developing your territory. And you are not sending your vehicle here on time with the stocks and my company loses market share. You are unable to run the show because you have not been investing in the business,' said Rajiv.

'Whom have you appointed in Rajahmundry?' asked Qadir, hesitantly.

'Lovely distributors,' said Rajiv.

'Never heard of this company. I am in this business for 20 years now,' said Qadir.

'I am helping a bunch of young MBAs start up the distribution business. Lovely is their setup,' said Rajiv.

'Okay Sir. I am also opening my office in Rajahmundry tomorrow. If the college kids cannot run the show, then give me a call. What, Sir? After such a lot of experience in channel trade, you have decided to trust a bunch of college kids?' commented Qadir.

'Yes, I have and I think they will do a good job. They will try hard to succeed, not become complacent like you,' said Rajiv.

'Hope you are coming to my house, Sir, in the evening. It's my daughter's birthday,' said Qadir.

'Of course! I remember Nushrat's birthday very well. May she have a long life. I will reach by seven in the evening,' said Rajiv.

'We will wait for you, Sir,' said Qadir.

Rajiv picked up his cell phone and dialed Srinivas' number.

'Have I not told you all to return my calls immediately?' Srinivas erupted soon as the call connected.

'And have I not told you that my focus is the customer, not the internal office system? In my view, the entire office exists to help us in the sales department serve the customers better. Only when I have finished all my calls to customers will I attend to internal calls,' answered Rajiv coolly.

'Had you not been the top performer, I would have sacked you a long time back,' replied Srinivas.

'Sir, I have been the top performer even before you were Regional Manager and will remain so even after you go. So it really does not matter,' said Rajiv.

'I called you to congratulate you on your promotion to Area Sales Manager, Rajiv,' said Srinivas, suddenly changing tracks.

'Why, sir? I had told you not to recommend me for that position. ASM is a transferrable job, with lesser incentives and for me my total salary will drop as my basic salary will increase and then I will be in the 30% tax bracket,' said Rajiv.

'Stop cribbing, Rajiv. You really deserve this. Come over to office tomorrow morning and meet me. I am really happy for you,' said Srinivas.

'Yes, sir. And thank you for promoting me. I am the only non-graduate ASM, aren't I?' asked Rajiv.

'Yes. But that's nothing to be proud of,' said Srinivas.

'Sir, I have travelled 12 km by foot every day to go to school. Could not continue college as my father passed away and the entire family's responsibility was on me when I was just 17 years old. I started as a distributor salesman and went about selling goods on a cycle. From there I have now become an

ASM. I am sure my father would have been very happy to see me as a manager. I just have to pick up on English', said Rajiv.

'You just have to play to your strengths, which is the deep understanding of the market and the way it works. Do not bother about English. Although, no harm learning it,' said Srinivas.

'Sir, can I visit the temple tomorrow and then come to office at 2 PM?' asked Rajiv.

'I am flying out to Delhi for a meeting with the Corporate Office at 12 noon. You come in the morning, take the letter, buy a car and then go to the temple,' said Srinivas.

'Sir, thank you once again,' said Rajiv.



Global Headquarters

‘**M**eenakshi, you must understand that India is the most important market for us. The competency framework for current Sales Managers and Sales Officers has to be created for the market afresh. What worked in Europe will not work in India at all,’ said Keith, the Global HR Head for Sales and Marketing.

‘I have commissioned an agency in India to design and develop the framework for us,’ said Meenakshi.

‘That’s precisely what I do not want. This agency can help you, but only you understand the culture and context of our company. A typical competency framework will not address the hockey stick kind of growth that we want. We have invested and have the necessary approvals from the board. Now, we need to grow at a rapid pace. More than 50% year-on-year,’ said Keith.

‘Sounds like you have a plan in mind,’ said Meenakshi.

‘Yes, I do. Listen carefully. I want you to go to India for the next two years and take on the position of the Regional

Manager of the state of Uttar Pradesh. There will be two carefully selected ASMs working with you. You need to build the market in the next two years, develop these ASMs, create a competency framework and come back,' said Keith.

'But I can't do that!' exclaimed Meenakshi, indignant. 'I am based in New Jersey. I majored in HR and marketing from Kellogg, not for a Regional Manager role.'

'Let's put it this way. We want you to head HR for the Global Sales and Marketing cluster. You are the identified successor for the position and you need to prove you are worthy of it. The first global assignment you have to work on is the competency design and development. For that you will have to do a few years' stint in six different markets and keep developing the framework and implementing it. If you want the role, you have to do this,' said Keith.

'You are telling me that I will have to be away from NJ for the next six years of my life? I need to think about this,' said Meenakshi.

'Sure. Think about it. If you do not want to do this, let me know. Steven is more than keen to take on this position and is willing to do whatever is needed,' said Keith.

In a short while, Keith had realized that the best way to get Meenakshi to agree on something was to invoke her

competitive spirit and the need to win. He was very sure that she would say yes.

And yes it was.

In a week, Meenakshi was on her way to India. She had read up about the most populous state of India, Uttar Pradesh, and was keen to meet the two newly promoted ASMs – Sudhakar and Rajiv. They were a study in contrasts: Sudhakar was an MBA from a leading business school in India, while Rajiv was a seasoned Sales Officer with 20 years of field experience, but was not even a graduate. One was skilled in analytics while the other was skilled in field operations.

‘Only Keith can come up with a weird experiment like this,’ Meenakshi had thought when she first heard about it.

In the hot month of June, after changing two flights, Meenakshi landed at Lucknow airport. It was a big relief to see a chauffeur from the Taj waiting outside the airport holding a placard with her name on it. She would be operating out of the hotel for the next three months, and then move into the Regional Office, which had to be identified and finalized by her.

She went over the list of capabilities and competencies that she had prepared. They were under the broad heads of Sales Management and Sales. Several sub-heads, such as Sales System, Revenue Management, Customers, Sales Process, Consumer

Awareness, Sales People, Market Coverage, Distributor Appointment, Sales Promotions, Selling Skills, Attitude and Ethics, Sales Structure, Sales Analytics, Predictive Analytics, Competitor Handling, Customer Centricity, Large Account Management, Developing Sales Force, High Value Sales, Retailing, and New Product Introduction were mentioned in the long list.

‘That’s a large chunk of things to do,’ thought Meenakshi. She decided to take a five-day tour around UP to understand the territory and the consumers, and also to unwind and sightsee in Uttarakhand. ‘By then, the two ASMs will reach here as well,’ she thought as she called the hotel travel desk.



The travel desk quickly arranged a trip and Meenakshi set out to see her coverage area. UP was a large state with an area of 250,000 sq km and 200 million people, divided into 18 divisions and further divided into 75 districts. The rich history and culture of the state was an interesting read. Several former prime ministers of India were from UP and it seemed to be a highly active state politically.

Meenakshi moved towards Allahabad, Faizabad, Barabanki, Varanasi and Gorakhpur. En route she made notes of living standards, competitor products, companies, livelihood of people, nature of crop grown and harvest times, cottage industries and political leadership.

She took a flight from Gorakhpur to Delhi and then on the way to Rishikesh, she passed through the towns of Meerut, Moradabad, Etawah, Hapur and Bareilly. This terrain was different from the earlier one; the competitors were smaller and lesser known. She also realized that the average disposable income was lesser and therefore there was the need to sell at lesser price points and in smaller pack sizes.

'Phew! Some good work done,' thought Meenakshi, as she reached the spa at Rishikesh at the end of her hectic 'field visit'.

She spent the next three days relaxing in the spa, getting over her fatigue and sorting out the things to be done. Pure vegetarian food, the beautiful view of the mountains and the snow-capped peaks of the Himalayas at a distance made her feel good. Early morning dips in the holy Ganga and long treks in the evenings were the highlights of her days.

An overnight train journey brought her back to her hotel in Lucknow. Though the train coach wasn't as dirty as she had expected, it could have been much better. The next day she was to meet the ASMs.

The short trip had made her realize the immense diversity within one state. It struck her that India, comprising 29 states with diversity within each state, would be a marketer's delight. The food, the dress and the language seemed to change about every 100 kilometers; so did the livelihood and income levels. In cities, the disparity was even higher. There were the slums, the garbage, the government clinics and schools – all of which were crying for immediate attention. On the other hand, in the same city, a small distance away were multiplexes and high-rise buildings with power backups, centralized air-conditioning and landscaped surroundings.

It was not as if the rich and the poor lived far away from each other. They lived close to each other, shared the same streets, the same infrastructure; however, they led very different lives. She needed to discuss all this and much more with the ASMs when she met them.

‘How to cover such a vast territory effectively?’ was a question bothering Meenakshi. Distribution as being currently practiced was ineffective. The few distributor salesmen she saw in the markets were operating on a very low-cost mode. In fact, everything seemed to be centered around being low cost, rather than being effective.

The distributor salesman would carry stocks on his moped, going from store to store, taking orders and selling the stocks. At times, he would have bought stocks from the distributor and then sold it in the market. Whatever profit he made was his earning. This way of working generated employment and was very low on skill requirement, but was highly inefficient.

Scanty information was available to the company on ground level realities. Marketing strategy was not based on real-time information; sales strategy seemed to be based on simply pushing material to distributors. The crux was, therefore, to create more distributors, push the stocks out to them based on the contracts and incentivize the flow of goods with larger discounts.