

Enhancing Customer Satisfaction through Fashion Retail

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ABSTRACT

The dynamic nature of fashion requires companies dealing in fabric and apparel to be responsive to the ever changing customer choices as the consumers not only seek novelty in the products, but also in the entire shopping experience. For this they not only deal with customer satisfaction but also compete with other players in this field. This poses challenges to the companies in fashion retail to provide not only quality material catering to varied choices of the diverse clientele but also be effective in terms of consumer time and cost of products. Thus, in order to be responsive to the customers' needs, the companies need to be effective on aspects ranging from procurement, production, design, distribution, sale and service while ensuring quality across all. This study is about improving the efficacy of the retail outlets of an Indian company dealing in fabrics and dress material.

Keywords: fashion retail, customer satisfaction survey, customer retention

1. Introduction

The fashion industry has many facets from production of fabric to consumption, the dynamics of which are changing rapidly with changes in needs and technology. It demands companies to stay agile and responsive to the customers' needs and choices. The ever changing and fast moving nature of fashion gives the apparel business a unique set of challenges. For any business to sustain, it needs to stand the customer orientation. To satisfy the customer (Drucker, 1985) is the mission and purpose of every business. According to Kotler (1997), key to success in the marketplace rests on attracting, satisfying and retaining customers in an effective and efficient manner. People make choices, and as a

retailer it is important to respond to their needs (Modak; 2006). The marketing mix is a series of elements, traditionally referred to as the four Ps, i.e. Price, Product, Promotion, Place, have now grown to seven Ps including People, Process and Physical evidence as well with the acknowledgement of the importance of service to the overall package of benefits bought by customers (Jackson T., Shaw D. 2001). Further, the shop characteristics are found to reflect and adapt to consumer behavior by gender (Chea, Pisey; 2011) wherein females were gather shoppers who went shopping for reasons of enjoyment and relaxation. Thus, they like spending time browsing to compare prices, products, and quality. On the other hand, men were hunter shoppers

who went shopping for need-driven. In addition, the impact of other variables like conversations among customers and with the staff, also affect the consumer satisfaction and sale. Modak (2006) highlights that sharing of a product's information (fabric composition, weave, etc.) and visual appeal also enhances sale, as not every customer is aesthetically inclined. Some need help and direction and so visual merchandising in a retail store helps boost sale. Conversations with other customers are shown to lead to greater satisfaction in the consideration phase than those with sales assistants (Harris. K, Barry J. Davies & Baron. S; 1997). Sales assistants are confirmed as less credible, and the notion that spoken interactions with assistants may lead to increased purchase intention is rejected. The variety seeking drive has an impact on brand switching propensity of consumers, so retailers need to ensure that their clothing brands or stores are among those in the multi brand repertoire of the consumer (Michaelidou, N., & Dibb, S. (2009).

So, in order to enhance customer satisfaction in retail fashion it is important to identify the factors that affect the sale and thus seek to address all challenges by understanding the philosophy and the processes undertaken. So as to bridge the gap between procurement, production, design, distribution and even sale of the material (fabric or apparel) by a company. This study is about understanding the problems faced by the retail stores of FFAB Creattions Private Limited, an Indian company engaged in manufacturing and imports of premium fashion fabrics.

2. About FFAB

FFAB Creattions Private Limited is an Indian company engaged in manufacturing and imports of premium fashion fabrics mostly made of natural and human-made fibers like Silk, Flax, Wool, Hemp, Jute, Cotton, Viscose, Bemberg (Cupro), Modal, Bamboo etc., mainly suited for fashion and home industry. The range includes, machine and hand woven, value added fabrics in embroideries, natural dyes and prints etc., in

multiple designs and categories. The wide collection of plain, printed and woven sarees to embroidered dupattas, stoles and scarves is manufactured from huge fabric collection ranging from fabrics like Chanderi, Brocade, Ikkat, Jamdaanis, Linen, Cotton, etc. The company initiated from a small place in Kolkata in 1998 to cater to the demand of creative and premium fabrics in the market, rich in colour, weave and culture, and gradually expanded by opening offices in Mumbai (2003) and Noida(2005). The company has its product reach out to more than 47 cities in India besides selling materials in various countries with a customer base above 4000 in both in India and abroad. The central warehouse is located in Noida with a branch office in Bengaluru and three showrooms, one each in Delhi, Ahmedabad and Kolkata that showcase the entire range of products. The company's employee strength covering extensive sales network, sales team rose from 2 to 70 plus people over the last 22 years. FFAB has a strong and reliable network of more than 1375 handloom weavers across different handloom clusters of India exclusively working for the company over the years.

3. Rationale and Objectives

FFAB claims to have an extensive network of the outlets with a huge customer base ranging from fashion designers to boutique owners, exporters, businessmen, etc. However, the company owners were concerned about the sale, customers' reach out and satisfaction in their retail outlets at Ahmadabad and Delhi. A systematic study in this regard was taken up with the following objectives.

1. To identify problems faced by the customers visiting FFAB store in selection and purchase of material (fabrics, colors, patterns, combinations etc.) as per seasons, events, festivals, cost etc.
2. To suggest measures to enhance satisfaction (w.r.t. selection and purchase of material) of the customers visiting FFAB.

- To facilitate the company to design a regulatory mechanism for increase in customer base and extend its reach out.

4. Methods

The study was conducted in two stores of the company, one was located in Delhi and the other was in Ahmadabad. A mixed method approach with tools that included a questionnaire for the customers, observations on the display and working of the staff in the stores, customer behavior, informal interactions using semi structured interview schedules with the owner, store head, visual merchandiser, sales staff was employed to collect data. A semi structured interview schedule each for the owner and for the staff of the stores were also used. Besides document analysis from data sources like official website of the company,

brochures (if any), invoice, and other related sources was carried out. The questionnaire comprised of 19 items, wherein one section aimed at taking and identifying the background of the customers who visited FFAB, so as to understand its target group of buyers. Some other items were intended to extract opinion of the customers about the stores and focused on their requirements, and their views regarding staff, fabric collection, window display, etc. Attempt was also made to capture their grievances and suggestions, through open-ended items in the questionnaire and even during informal interactions. Each of the interview schedules had seven to eight questions with multiple probes on different aspects pertaining to dig out deep information on the retail stores.

Table 1. Number of respondents

S. No.	Respondents	Number
1.	Customers	54 (Delhi- 40, Ahmadabad -14)
2.	Owner	01
3.	Store Head	01 (Delhi)
4.	Visual Merchandiser	01
5.	Sales Staff	05

The data was collected in both face-to-face and e-mode (Google proformae, email and Whats App). Out of 54 clients who filled the questionnaire, one or two of them skipped some of the items. Accordingly, the responses for each item were analyzed separately and this data was triangulated with information obtained from questionnaire, interactions, field observations and from the secondary sources using document analysis.

5. Limitations of the Study

- The data from the Delhi store involved face to face interactions with the customers, employees and owners as the researcher worked at this outlet for a month during summer holidays.
- Only telephonic and e-mode was used to collect data from the Ahmadabad store.

6. Results and Discussion

Most of clients were above the age of thirty, few in twenties and very few in their teens. With majority being educated; graduate (58%) and postgraduate (14%); and married (84.6%) the clients were expected to be mature to make individual choices. Most of the visitors to the stores are females and male clients who visit the store occasionally are only exporters or fashion designers.

Table 2. Male and Female respondents

Respondents	Number
Female	48
Male	05
Total	52

The company website and the interactions with different stakeholders ranging from the owners to the employees revealed that FFAB enjoys a good reputation especially among fashion designers. The results coincided with the data on professional engagement and experience (Fig. 1) of customers. Most customers were boutique owners (38.6%) and fashion designers (27.3%) whereas only a fraction was exporters. Rest of the clients were buyers

from different sectors namely government job, business corporate, advocates, homemakers and people who owned their own business ventures other than fabrics. A limited number of shoppers purchased for their personal use whereas the rest needed the fabric for others. Informal interactions with the customers revealed that many of them wanted to purchase in bulk for their business/professional needs (boutiques/emporiums/shops/ franchise).

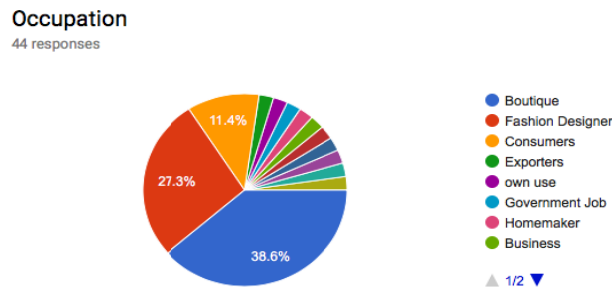


Figure 1. Background of Customers

In order to understand the reach out of the company to its customers the responses to the source from where the clients came to know about the FFAB outlet were explored. It was observed (Fig.2) that most of them (49%) noticed the outlet while passing by in

addition to about 39% customers heard about it from their friends. Only a small but equal fraction became familiar through social media and exhibitions. The owners shared that they have no mechanism of public relations except the company website.



Figure 2. Customers' Source of Knowledge About FFAB

FFAB claims to be one of its kind i.e. a creative textile company which is one of the largest supplier of fabrics to the fashion industry in India. The owners shared that their exclusive tie-ups in various places over the years with the best weavers in powerloom and mill sector, who manufacture fabrics as per the global quality standards, help them deliver quality stuff at the stores. This claim gets substantiated

when 88.7% of the customers appreciated the collection of fabrics. All of them rated the products from excellent (53.7%) to good (46.3%) and none chose the option 'needs improvement'. 42.3% also liked the window display whereas many of them are not satisfied with their arrangement and segregation as only 26.4% find the organization and display of fabrics appropriate (Fig.3).

What was appealing about the store (choose as many as you want)?

53 responses

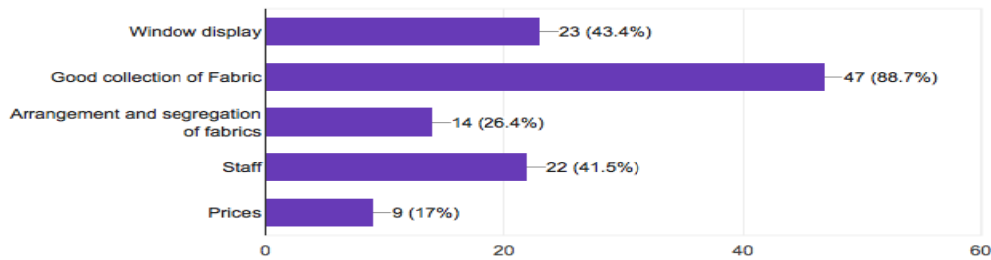


Figure 3. Factors that appeal to Customers

A sizable number of customers expressed satisfaction with respect to the staff engaged in the stores. Almost all the visitors rated behavior of staff cordial and cooperative. They expressed that the staff has a sound knowledge and understanding of the products and also had convincing skills. A negligible portion disapproved of the communication/convincing skills of the staff employed.

The company takes pride in providing incessant support to customers through swatches, images and design updates. With digital database of more than 10,000 designs that are updated with new additions to the existing collection from time to time. Fig. 4 shows that Chanderi and Cotton based fabrics are the top choices of the shoppers (49.1%) and thus are highest in demand, which is followed by Silk (45.3%) and subsequently by Khadi at 39.6%. Others such as Ikkat, Linen and Brocade are somewhat in demand i.e. 17%, 22.6%, 28.3% respectively. The least required fabric is Chiffon being lowest in demand (1.9%) among customers. The demand for plains is moderately low (9.4%) whereas that for embroidery (32.1%) and prints (39.6%) is relatively higher.

The observations of the collection revealed that it covered a wide expanse of Chanderi, Cotton, Silk, Brocade, Khadi and Cotton-silk, which were rich in prints and embroidery whereas variety in Linen, Chiffon, Organza, Georgette and plain fabrics was inadequate. The company's claim of the huge variety of collection was countered by the customers' views as many of them shared that they did not like the Organza and Ikkat compilation, the former being only plains and the latter being poor in terms of colors and patterns. Some other views were like;

"Need to keep more prints in Georgette variety,"

"Add more western prints."

"Need to get more Luckhnavi fabrics."

The period of study being summer time justifies the huge demand for Chanderi, Cotton, and Khadi and Linen yet the requirement of Silk could be attributed to designers or exporters i.e. customers who would be trading in fabrics outside the city or India. The lack of variety of Chiffon, Georgette and Organza could be the reason for their low demand.

What kind of fabric material did you require?

53 responses

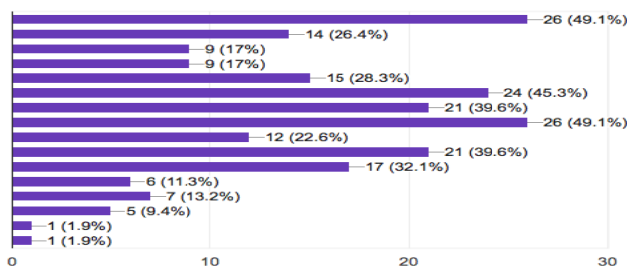


Figure 4. Choices of Fabric Material

Although the company website emphasises strong focus on design and innovation through state of the art in-house design studio and the owners shared that they worked extensively with handloom weavers in different handloom clusters across India for revival of their art and also to provide its partner weavers a sustained platform for growth, yet, the customers felt that more of the handloom work could be used in their collection when they mentioned,

“Prefer hand blocks instead of digital prints.”

“Don’t find much of the handloom collection.”

“Our customers demand handloom clothes.”

“I was looking for a handloom saree”

With finished products, demand for dupattas, suit sets, sarees, Jamdanis is namely, 26.4%, 17%, 13.2%, and 11.3% respectively. On being asked, the customers expressed that they wanted more variety in sarees and Jamadanis. Some of them also suggested, *“Keep finished fabric as well.”*

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The occasion also influences the choice of fabrics largely. People visiting the stores have a high preference for fabrics usable for marriage and other related events or festivals (35.8%). Demand for daywear fabrics (32.1%) justifies the huge demand for Chanderi and Cotton fabrics. Demand for official wear (20.8%) and eveningwear (11.3%) is moderate (Fig. 5).

What is the occasion for which you want to buy the fabric?

53 responses

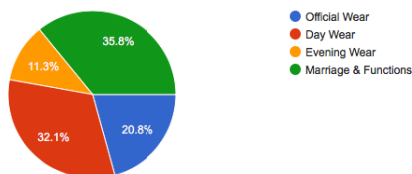


Figure 5. Occasion for Fabric choice

Most of the customers wanted mix and match combinations of fabrics. Although, many of them did express satisfaction with good selections of fabric in the stores (Fig.3). However, it was observed that the customers spent a long time in the store

trying to find the right match to a fabric or to make the combination of their choice. Some of the buyers gave multiple visits to the stores just to be absolutely sure before purchasing it. Often, this dissatisfaction of the clients made them leave the store

without buying the fabric they were interested in.

Fig.6 shows that 50.9% of the customers prefer looking at the fabrics and making combinations on their own. This could be due to either they do not like the existing combinations or their choices do not gel with the taste of the sales staff that offers

help and suggestions. Another reason for the same could be that many boutique owners, exporters and designers visit the store and they already have a good knowledge about the fabrics and designs, they also follow a certain design process and aesthetic, hence do not like taking the opinions from sales staff. 34% of buyers liked taking suggestions from more experienced staff.

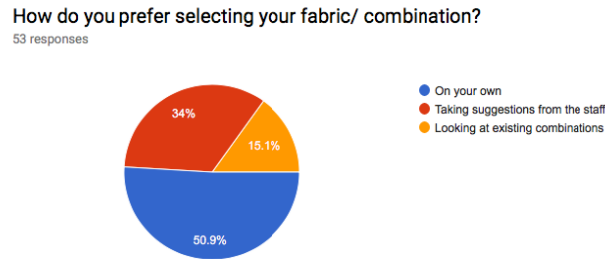


Figure 6. Preference for Fabric selection by customers

Staff from a reputed institute like the National Fashion Technology Institutes.). Many customers shared this informally during interaction with the researcher when she offered them help. They were happy with the regular sales staff when they provided knowledge and suggestions regarding the latest collection, offers, etc. going on in the store. Apparently, the customers appreciated support and help throughout their shopping time. 15.1% of the buyers wanted readymade combinations. However, when asked for their preference for existing mix and match, nearly 79% opted the same.

The company's claim on standard and fair prices for its products, which is mentioned, goes through stringent quality checks and partially matches the expectations of the

A clients as only 1/10th of them find the prices reasonable; whereas 37% consider them as exorbitant (Fig.7.). It was a common experience to see the customers bargaining while shopping in the store. Half of the suggestions given by the customers for making improvement in different aspects were of reduction in prices and rebates. A sizable number (51%) opined that the prices are justified for the fine quality of the fabrics. It was also shared that FFAB provides services in the shortest possible time irrespective of the size of orders with strict adherence to the delivery date. The clients also expressed the same when around 95% of the clients rated their experience at the store from good (53.7%) to excellent (40.7%). 6% of them expressed it as decent and none mentioned it to be bad.

Your opinion on store prices.
54 responses

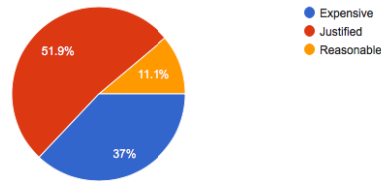


Figure 7. Views on Prices of Fabrics

7. Findings, Conclusion and Suggestions

On the basis of the above, the following are a set of findings that throw light on the challenges that affect the efficacy of the retail outlets of the FFAB.

7.1 Findings

- * The company reaches out to the customers only through its website . A majority of them noticed the stores while passing by and others heard about it from their friends. So it can be said that a conscious approach seems to be lacking on company’s behalf as word of mouth seems to be the mode of reaching out to the customers by FFAB
- * The customers visiting the stores are young people, mostly in their 30s who are not only mature enough to take their own decision but also are also well informed about the fabrics to choose them as per their requirements. A majority of them are females.
- * Most of them do not need fabric in bulk, as the majority are boutique owners and fashion designers with exporters coming scarcely. Only a few visitors need products for their personal use whereas largely the requirement is for business or professional need.
- * The collection of Chanderi, Cotton, Silk, Khadi, and Cotton-silk is rich in prints and embroidery and is also found to be in quite popular demand. Ikkat, Linen and Brocade followed it whereas Chiffon, Organza and Georgette were least in demand.
- * Chiffon, Linen and Georgette lacked in variety whereas the Ikkat and Organza

collection did not appeal the customers. Ikkat did not have the patterns and colors of their choice whereas Organza and Georgette collection had only plains with no prints or embroidery and the demand for plains was very less as compared to embroidered and printed fabrics.

- * The period of study being summer time justifies the huge demand for Chanderi, Cotton, and Khadi and Linen yet the high requirement of Silk could be attributed to designers or exporters i.e. customers who would be trading in fabrics outside the cities or India.
- * Among finished products, the customers preferred dupattas suit sets, which had more variety to sarees and Jamdanis. They also preferred handloom and hand block prints instead of digital designs.
- * Most of the customers purchased material for formal wear during marriages and other festivals as compared to casual wear. They preferred mix and match combinations, which they select on their own as the staff was, not equipped to help them in this regard. This required making considerable efforts in terms of time and multiple visits, which appears to be a major factor for dissatisfaction of customers, eventually affecting the sale at stores.
- * High demand for both the formal and casual stuff irrespective of the season indicates that although the exporters, who visit the FFAB stores are very less yet they purchase the maximum as clients could be exporting the FFAB

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material to different parts, in and out of the country.

- * Though the staff at the stores, engaged in public dealing is polite and cooperative but it lacks the skills to tap the interests of the customers to help them to shop fabrics, material or items of their choice.
- * Although satisfied with the quality and the service in terms of adherence to the delivery dates irrespective of the size of the orders by the company, a large section of customers expressed their concern for the exorbitant prices of the material.
- * Despite a good collection, the limited range of existing display, arrangement and organization of the material besides the dearth of competence of the support staff to suggest attractive amalgamations of fabrics hinders the sale at the stores.

The use of only telephonic and e-mode to collect data from the Ahmadabad store made it difficult to capture the field observations from that store, which could impact the findings as the opportunity to have any informal interactions was missing with this outlet.

7.2 Conclusion

It is evident that the FFAB lacks in some of the Ps like Place, Promotion and People, which eventually affect store sales. In terms of 'Place' which refers to the channels through which the products are sold, including the accessibility, location, available selling space, layout and presentation. The lack of proper layout, display and organization of the material within the available space in the stores widens the gap between the buyer and the product as far as the accessibility is concerned. Besides, the company does not enjoy a good outreach to potential customers, as those visiting the stores happen to do so only by chance. Most of the customers being young businesswomen who deal in small-scale set ups, do not purchase the material in bulk. The seasons and occasions also affect the choice of material

for sale, which is evident from the high demand of Cotton, Khadi, Chanderi, Silk etc. whereas and cultural contexts could be the reason behind inclination for the prints, embroidery over plains. Lack of variety in terms of colors, patterns and handmade prints and material was causing the poor sale of some type of dress materials. The discontent of the clients also gets reflected towards higher price, non-availability of the mix and match combinations and the inability of the staff to provide them adequate support in this regard. Quality material and efficient service besides cooperative staff were some of the strengths of the FFAB stores.

7.3. Suggestions

To enhance the sale and profit in the retail outlets the company needs to work upon augmenting the customer number, their satisfaction or get bulk orders, which requires it to manage the integrated contributions of all functions in the fashion retail business to provide benefits. Firstly, it is 'Promotion' which is the culmination of a number of retailer functions that range from product labels, packaging to image-based advertising or public relations mechanism and in-store visual merchandising in addition to incentives designed to increase sales. Since very few designers or exporters visit the store, it is recommended that a suitable mechanism to reach out to this section of clientele is needed. The customers belong to well-educated and techno savvy class; hence it will be better if the company adopts better measures of personal contact like exhibitions, going at the doorstep of designers, boutiques, export houses or through media involving both print and digital mode such as social platforms, newspapers, pamphlets, etc. Customer satisfaction will also enhance their number as word of mouth was also found to be a good source of information about the store. The company needs to hire or employ a PRO for making advertising and public relations effective to enhance the customer base. In addition, keeping in view the advancement in ICT, an O2O (Online to

offline) model may also be adopted. Besides the customers need to be provide access to sufficient choice of styles, colours, sizes and price points, with appropriate changes in display regularly to maintain the perception of fresh fashion looks in the stores. The company is doing well on quality and service aspects of the products, it is important to carefully rationalize the prices of the products which may either be compared with those from different competitors in the market or justified accordingly. Alternatively, a suitable mode to apprise and convince the clients for the price quoted may be adopted.

The reason to buy is influenced by the contribution of the store management by the 'People' which comprise of the all individuals from customers, suppliers and the fashion retailer's staff, who are involved in the buying and selling of the products. To enhance sale the FFAB must ensure that all involved in the supply chain have a clear understanding of the customers' fashion product needs and expectations. Facilitating customers to try different mix and match combinations of fabrics, colors, patterns, that do not cost the precious time of both the buyers and sellers need to be the utmost priority. This requires providing ample combinations created by experts, which need to be made available to customers to make choices as per seasons, events, festivals and cost. In addition, staff with appropriate skills and knowledge on fabrics who could mediate between the customer and the sale staff may be employed.

The organization of the collection also plays a major role in enhancing customer satisfaction. Micro planning for proper organization of fabrics in the store to make this process feasible may also be taken up. A synergistic effort of the interior decorator, designer, staff and the owner may be helpful. Although majority of the visitors rated their overall experience at the store to be good yet customer satisfaction gets reflected through the business transactions that a company makes. In this regard, FFAB

needs to make efforts for changing the opinion of customers from good to excellent and enhance the customer base and that too with those who could place orders in bulk. The design section also needs strengthening to add variety to Linen, Chiffon, Georgette and patterns may be improved for Organza and Ikkat collection. Variety of plains in different types of fabric may also be improved.

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