

## **BRAND AND CUSTOMER: The Perfect Pair**

Ahmed Dulla says he was never a bright student and once thought that becoming taxi driver would be his highest aspiration in life. Then, by happenstance, he stumbled upon footwear technology on the internet and enrolled into Footwear Design and Development Institute (FDDI) in India. There on, he worked for several renowned international brands, such as Aldo and Zara, before returning to Kathmandu in 2012 to launch his own brand—Dulla Shoes. Having made a mark manufacturing a variety of leather shoes and bags, Dulla parted ways with his brainchild to start up the fresh The Factory Team, where he currently is the CEO. In this interview with the Post's Alisha Sijapati, Dulla talks about rebranding his products in the market and tapping into customers' expectations. Excerpts:

**Can you tell us about the transition from Dulla Shoes to The Factory Team?**

While I was the creative head at the Dulla Shoes, it was my family who were the major investors. Due to some differences, I unfortunately had to part ways. It was a tough call as Dulla was already gaining prominence in the market. Coming up with a brand new name and whole new management, that too solely, was an overwhelming experience. When I parted ways with my family, I was afraid I couldn't do it on my own, but I also had the confidence in the belief people have had in my designs and customer values. I don't know if I have made it to the top yet, but my six-member team and I have worked endlessly to create a niche for the brand in the market. It's not even been a whole year and the sales have already soared to a point that is better than before.

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**How challenging has it been for you to re-brand yourself and your products all over again?**

The initial couple of days was difficult, but with a good experience and loyal customers on board things was okay. Our office is located in an alley and surprisingly, the customer

flow is better than what it used to be at Dulla Shoes. The customers' <sup>number of ppl entering shop</sup> footfall has been a huge motivation for us. I think because Dulla Shoes was named after me, the brand tapped into the market as mine. People still call The Factory Team as Dulla's Shoes. It's bittersweet, mostly

sweet because now I know that I have created a certain name for myself and my work among the customers. Also, we started The Factory Team a year back and I don't think the name has altered the love and support we get from our customers.

### **How does the Factory Team understand and meet its customers' expectations?**

In order to understand what your customers need, you need to invest in a strong customer base. However, this is not enough. You need to constantly interact with them, ask for feedback, and work toward improvisation over and over again. For the initial three years of Dulla, I made the shoes myself and delivered them personally to the customers. I had a personal connection with them.

In order to run a successful business, it is important that you maintain a certain level of personal relationship with your customers. People in Nepal, both men and women, are crazy about shoes.

Our niche audience are the working professionals. As we use high-end materials and leather to make our shoes, our products are more expensive than what is available in the market. Earlier, customers were hesitant to buy handmade leather products. But now, people have become fashion conscious and consumers understand and know the value and difference between a good and a bad product. So, with our world class products, it is not a challenge to meet the expectations.

### **What are some brand strategies you have implemented to retain yourself in the market?**

Every year, I am under the pressure to come up with something new. I always need to think and brainstorm on how I can do something more creative and innovative to raise the portfolio of our brand. So this year, we have come up with new shoe boxes and velvet bags with premium qualities. Before, customers complained about packaging. Hence, we embraced the suggestions and invested in new designs. For many, delivering shoe boxes with premium quality may seem foolish, but it is essential for us in order to elevate the status of our brand. Even the littlest thing can make or break a brand.

} If you want to sustain in the market, patience and perseverance are key. }

### **The Factory Team seems to have invested more in Social Media than it has in a physical space. What future plans do you have when it comes to business expansion?**

When I ventured into this field, I was also looking towards opening a showroom. But having done some market research I realised it would be a bad investment. Our shop is located right behind City Centre and I hardly see people carrying shopping bags, people come to this area to watch movies and to dine.



I didn't want to divulge my energy into a physical store, especially when I know our customers are tech-savvy. Everybody is on social network. Maximum clients order shoes or bags online: either through Facebook or Instagram. Social media has actually made our bond with the customers strong. In fact, most of our products are sold out due to online purchases. Lately though, we are seeing good flow of customers in the store. Hence, in future we might come up with something new. There is no point in taking leaps in haste for it might incur heavy losses.

**What are your few tips on creating a better brand image for the organisation?**

Customers are smart these days; they can differentiate between a good and a bad product. Make sure you are delivering best possible quality. Also, when there is a complaint from a customer, keep it if you need it, and just let it go if you don't. Remember: customers are always right. You can't argue with them, and you can't fight them. So, when you receive complaints, try to control the damage immediately. A brand is nothing without its customers.

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