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PEPPERFRY.COM: MARKETING TO MANAGE CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE[[1]](#endnote-1)

Gaganpreet Singh, Sandeep Puri, and Sanjit Kumar Roy wrote this case solely to provide material for class discussion. The authors do not intend to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The authors may have disguised certain names and other identifying information to protect confidentiality.

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Our goal is to help 20 million customers create beautiful homes by 2020.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Kashyap Vadapalli,

chief marketing officer, Pepperfry

It was September 2016, and Pepperfry.com (Pepperfry), India’s pioneering furniture and lifestyle online retailer (e-tailer), felt it was the opportune time to take its growth further by expanding the furniture business. Ashish Shah, the co-founder and chief operating officer of Pepperfry, was pleased with the company’s profitability. The company had improved its margin by 13–15 per cent in 2015, and its products had been making a margin of 35–50 per cent, resulting in a turnover of ₹10 billion[[3]](#endnote-3) in 2015. According to Shah, it was time now to focus on breaking even and forging ahead. Encouraged by annual revenue growth of more than 250 per cent consistently since 2013, he expected Pepperfry to break even by the first quarter of fiscal year 2018–19.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Pepperfry’s first-mover advantage in the Indian online furniture market had helped the company to achieve significant milestones within a short time span.[[5]](#endnote-5) Online marketing of furniture, however, involved distinct challenges compared with marketplaces that sold standard products. Improving customer experience at the different stages of a consumer’s purchase could be the foundational strategy to resolve these challenges.[[6]](#endnote-6) How could Pepperfry’s service design further enhance the customer experience and achieve a competitive advantage?

THE COMPANY

Pepperfry operated on a “managed marketplace” model—that is, it acted as a platform for artisans and merchants to showcase and sell their merchandise to millions of discerning customers.[[7]](#endnote-7) By September 2016, Pepperfry owned and operated **17 fulfilment hubs with a delivery fleet of more than 400 vehicles.**[[8]](#endnote-8)The company had become a platform to more than 1,000 merchant partners across India, enabling them to sell their craftsmanship and design skills. It had a range of more than 1 million units[[9]](#endnote-9) spread across various lifestyle and furniture product lines.[[10]](#endnote-10) The company sold a product every 25 seconds and shipped items to more than 1,000 cities across India.[[11]](#endnote-11)

In 2014, more than 70 per cent of Pepperfry’s online transactions originated from the top 10 cities of India, which suggested the reluctance of Indian customers to buy furniture and related products from an online space.[[12]](#endnote-12) Along with the challenge of reluctant customers, Pepperfry faced the added onus of making the furniture feel and look real on a screen.[[13]](#endnote-13) These challenges encouraged the leadership at Pepperfry to consider a strategy to reduce customer reluctance toward online furniture shopping. Of the many required initiatives, Pepperfry manoeuvred into an online-to-offline hybrid business model,[[14]](#endnote-14) which became the foundation for the “Studio Pepperfry” experience centres.[[15]](#endnote-15)

The idea behind Studio Pepperfry was to offer potential buyers an experience of the product and expert advice, not necessarily to sell any furniture.[[16]](#endnote-16) Shah explained that the experience centres offered a place for customers to better understand the various ranges, designs, and textures of furniture the company offered online. The studios were launched as customer meeting-and-learning points where the company supplemented the experience by offering advice on interior design and furniture choices. The experience centres were never intended to be the brand’s sales destinations.[[17]](#endnote-17)

Pepperfry intended to add to its 14 operational studios located in India’s Tier 1[[18]](#endnote-18) cities (e.g., Mumbai, Bangalore, Chennai, Gurgaon, and Kolkata). In terms of customer acceptance, Shah claimed, “Each studio attracts an average footfall of 35–40 customers per day and 30­–40 per cent of those walk-ins get converted into sales on a monthly basis.”[[19]](#endnote-19)

Comparing the performance between online and offline stores, Shah stated, “We spend ₹800,000–1.5 million per month on a store. For a large inventory, it will cost us about ₹500,000–1 million per month, depending on the location. So, we opened studios where customers can experience and not just recollect the brand.”[[20]](#endnote-20)

THE FURNITURE MARKET IN INDIA

India’s furniture and furnishings market included home accessories, such as linen and other home décor products, but not consumables such as home-improvement items or bathroom and kitchen fittings. Both furniture and furnishings shared a market value of approximately US$10 billion each, and in the furniture segment, household items comprised 70 per cent. The present organized residential furniture market, valued at approximately 6 per cent (US$400 million), was expected to touch a compound annual growth rate of 27 per cent to reach US$1.3 billion by 2020.[[21]](#endnote-21)

In India, the online trading of furniture took off in 2012 with Pepperfry, FabFurnish, and Urban Ladder all launching their sites within months of each other.[[22]](#endnote-22) Others such as StitchWood, CustomFurnish, and Wooden Street joined the fray later.[[23]](#endnote-23) Aside from these furniture-exclusive websites or vertical players, other e-commerce platforms like Flipkart, Amazon, and Snapdeal also “e-tailed” furniture and furnishings as horizontal players. The managing director of Norwest Venture expected online furniture retailing to improve with time, considering most of the business in the industry was still offline and had gross margins of more than 50 per cent. He pointed to Pepperfry’s remarkable traction and market leadership in the furniture online space, which was not as aggressive as fashion.[[24]](#endnote-24)

Among the exclusive players, Pepperfry controlled 50 per cent of India’s total furniture market share; however, the non-exclusive competitors controlled 10–15 per cent.[[25]](#endnote-25) The online furniture sector had attracted the interest of investors through a heavy infusion of capital. In September 2016, Pepperfry led the contest of raising capital with approximately US$160 million, twice that of its competitor Urban Ladder.[[26]](#endnote-26) The funds were used to strengthen customer experience by opening more studios, strengthening the logistics network, and upgrading technology and marketing initiatives.[[27]](#endnote-27)

CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE MANAGEMENT

Furniture was a non-standard product and did not entail an impulse purchase.[[28]](#endnote-28) Kashyap Vadapalli, chief marketing officer of Pepperfry, mentioned that an average purchase at Pepperfry took two to four weeks to execute, and the time frame was longer for higher-priced items.[[29]](#endnote-29) The average amount spent by consumers on Pepperfry was ₹12,000. On average, potential customers explored the product portfolio nearly 15–20 times before arriving at the purchase decision.[[30]](#endnote-30) The repetitive interactions with the resources in both offline and online retail channels affected the customer experience, which was defined as a “subjective response to the holistic direct and indirect encounter with the firm.”[[31]](#endnote-31) The interaction could be during any stage—searching, buying, or consuming. Shah explained that because consumers indulged in deep searching and discussions with friends and family before making a purchase decision, Pepperfry’s studios acted as catalysts that led the customer into the journey of buying furniture online. At the studio, customers not only became familiar with the brand but also made a direct sensory assessment of the products that they were interested in buying. To fortify the experience, instead of having salespersons, these studios had interior designers, who could convince a customer to become a buyer.[[32]](#endnote-32)

Shah believed that one of the prerequisites for a superior buying experience was the management of customer experience at all stages of the consumer decision process from pre-sales to post-sales, including customer service.[[33]](#endnote-33) To further enhance the customer experience, Pepperfry had introduced virtual reality tours of its studios. Leveraging technology, it enabled potential customers to feel the real shopping environment without having to visit to a physical store.[[34]](#endnote-34) Deepak Sharma, product head of Pepperfry, described the studios as “experience and design inspiration centres” that offered consumers a wide-angled virtual view so that they could choose from a range of homes designs from anywhere, anytime.[[35]](#endnote-35)

With the intent to further spread its wings in the offline space, Pepperfry launched many popular initiatives, including “Pepperfry Live”[[36]](#endnote-36) in collaboration with HomeStop, a complete home solution retail chain. Shah lauded this partnership and said that HomeStop and Pepperfry had much in common. While HomeStop was a complete home solutions chain selling several national and international brands (e.g., @Home by Nilkamal, Evok, Corelle, Magpie, Oxo, Bombay Dyeing, Welspun, Phillips, and Portico), Pepperfry, too, was a marketplace that offered more than 80,000 products from national and international brands. Shah said that it was commendable that the large home solutions retail chain recognized Pepperfry’s clout in the online furniture and furnishing space and entered into the partnership where HomeStop’s idea was to select and hold an inventory of 80–85 of Pepperfry’s products and display them in regular 25,000- to 100,000-square-foot brick-and-mortar stores. The arrangement meant free shelf space for Pepperfry and the opportunity to reach out to more customers because these stores received between 600 and 900 footfalls every day and enabled customers to both experience and buy Pepperfry products.[[37]](#endnote-37)

For made-to-order furniture, Pepperfry closely monitored each stage of product development, safeguarding the highest-quality interest of customers. The products were shipped through either the company’s own delivery network or experienced third-party logistics partners.[[38]](#endnote-38) However, poor last-mile connectivity as a result of missing links in the supply-chain infrastructure became barriers to Pepperfry offering services to several potential customers.[[39]](#endnote-39) To reduce this problem of reach, Pepperfry executed the last-mile delivery model for speedy and damage-free home-delivery distribution of heavy furniture to 400 Indian cities.[[40]](#endnote-40)

Marketing Initiatives

Marketing played an extensive and complementary role in influencing consumers’ purchase decisions.[[41]](#endnote-41) Since its inception, the goal of Pepperfry’s marketing team was to attract consumers toward online furniture shopping. Advertisements were leveraged to connect with consumers and achieve this objective. Some of the many initiatives included 360-degree marketing and marketing at airport lounges.

360-Degree Marketing

The 360-degree integrated campaign targeted the segment that had furniture made at home.[[42]](#endnote-42) These campaigns focused on the negatives of homemade furniture, including noise and dust from the sawing and drilling, the physical inconvenience of having to move furniture, time and budget overruns, and eventual design and functional flaws.[[43]](#endnote-43) Pepperfry offered itself as the better alternative that not only negated all the inconveniences of homemade furniture but also offered the seamless, hassle-free, and flawless option that customers should choose instead. According to Debarjyo Nandi, senior vice-president from the content development team, the rationale behind the campaign was to pitch Pepperfry as the easier-and-simpler go-to option for all furniture needs to a segment that swore by homemade furniture.[[44]](#endnote-44) The various positioning statements used as a part of this campaign included the following: “Stop suffering and leave the hard work to us.”[[45]](#endnote-45) “Don’t compromise, get the furniture you need on Pepperfry.com.”[[46]](#endnote-46)

Vadapalli explained the thought behind this promotional content: “Our goal is to help 20 million customers create beautiful homes by 2020. In these last few years, Pepperfry has reached a tipping point amongst early adopters and via this campaign we will expand the market by going up the product life cycle curve to address the early majority of shoppers.”[[47]](#endnote-47)

Marketing at Airport Lounges

Pepperfry focused its marketing efforts on airport lounges in India’s Tier 1 cities, by showing customers the experience offered by the Pepperfry products and related services. The “Pepperfry Furniture Lounges” promoted its brand proposition, “Happy Furniture to You.”[[48]](#endnote-48) Vadapalli detailed the activity as an attempt by Pepperfry to give customers a feel of its furniture quality and have them become familiarized with the brand. He explained that the lounges doubled as display zones exclusively to attract customers to the Pepperfry world of furniture experience. The idea was to make this experience a key aspect of the company’s larger marketing campaign to expand its reach and build customer confidence in the brand.[[49]](#endnote-49)

These marketing campaigns and initiatives successfully influenced prospective customers, leading them to explore Pepperfry for further information. When customers explored both online and offline retail-space offerings, their experience was affected by various “Ps” of the marketing mix: people, price, product, place, physical evidence, process, and promotion.

EVOLVING INDIAN CONSUMERS

Technology and lifestyle changes in India resulted in consumers becoming more demanding and more value-conscious.[[50]](#endnote-50) Constant urbanization, propelled by higher salaries, more women in the workforce, a younger population, and the rapid growth and spread of the retail sector, had led to a change in consumer buying habits in India. Online transactions among Indians increased as a result of their higher spending capacity and rapid Internet penetration. Because of this development, online retailing in India was projected to reach US$55 billion by 2018 (up from US$14 billion in 2015), and US$220 billion in terms of gross merchandise value by 2025.[[51]](#endnote-51) These forecasts justified the evolution in Indian consumer behaviour.

Another factor that corroborated the presence and future dominance of e-tailers was the quality of urbanization, which encouraged consumers to look for convenience in different modes of living, including shopping. These consumers, therefore, looked for ways to free up more time in their busy schedules. Shopping convenience and free home delivery appeared to be key drivers behind the online shopping trend among consumers. Online shopping had changed the traditional purchasing behaviour of customers. With a few clicks, customers could find details of various products simultaneously. They felt more in control regarding the type of seller that they purchased from, and the product’s quantity, size, style, colour, and price. Customers could also compare prices and discount offers.

THE CHALLENGES OF ONLINE FURNITURE TRADING

Unlike other standard products that retailed on e-commerce (e.g., books and phones), online furniture trading was trickier because of the additional challenges associated with the supply chain.[[52]](#endnote-52) Ambareesh Murty, Pepperfry’s co-founder and chief executive officer, described the furniture business as costly and fraught with difficulties.[[53]](#endnote-53) He felt the real tests lay not in the technology but in the damage-free delivery of expensive products and combatting copycats at the hyperlocal level.[[54]](#endnote-54)

Online security and confidentiality issues during financial transactions were of particular concern in India, which left consumers wary of making purchases through websites.[[55]](#endnote-55) Although convenience was a key driver among online buyers, for other consumers, doubts persisted regarding the quality and speed of Internet connections. For these consumers, a good online shopping experience remained a dream with regard to shopping from sophisticated image- and video-heavy websites; besides, of India’s total population, only a mere 18 per cent had access to the Internet.[[56]](#endnote-56) Adding to e-tailers’ challenge of slow and negligible Internet connectivity was the task of drawing consumers to portals in a hyper-competitive age.

Most online furniture retailers also faced large-item distribution issues. Pepperfry gained a competitive advantage by inventing its own hub-and-spoke “large-item distribution model” that covered 97 per cent of the orders placed on the marketplace.[[57]](#endnote-57) This innovative distribution model allowed the company to expand its reach by providing the home delivery of bulky items.

THE WAY FORWARD

Although Pepperfry controlled 50 per cent of India’s total furniture market share, non-exclusive competitors regulated 10–15 per cent of the market.[[58]](#endnote-58) Because the online furniture space had attracted the attention of investors, funding was not difficult. From time to time, Pepperfry used some funds to strengthen the customer experience by opening additional experience studios, strengthening its logistics network, and upgrading its technology and marketing initiatives. Pepperfry’s relentless efforts were aimed at customizing its processes to improve the customer experience. How could the company’s service design be leveraged to further enhance customer experience during the purchase process? How could Pepperfry leverage this improved customer experience to achieve a competitive advantage for customers’ next decision journeys?

Gaganpreet Singh is an assistant professor at NMIMS, Hyderabad; Sandeep Puri is an associate professor at IMT, Ghaziabad; and Sanjit Kumar Roy is a senior lecturer at UWA Business School, The University of Western Australia.

ENDNOTES

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