# Introduction

The world of internet is progressing towards making individuals’ life easier to live. It does it by means of various appliances, gadgets and online services by which an individual can either take his products to the world or get benefitted by the ones provided online by others. In the shopping world too, the benefits are realized by society, where not only customers are happy buying their needs online at competitive prices but merchants also are able to reach to very large volume of customers and hence able to register large profits through big volume turnover.

Retail shopping portals provide customers an ability to choose their products from among thousands of options available and make them buy these online with hassle free home deliveries. They also provide ability to return some goods if not found suitable to one’s choice. Retail giants are offering lucrative discounts and cash back options in order to be ahead of their competitors. Merchants can do that because they have reached to the remotest customer in the region who carries a smartphone, which makes them deal with huge volume of goods. So gaining even a smallest profit per unit of sale enables them to earn huge profit figures. Sharing some portion of their gains with customers helps increasing the customer base as well as customer affinity further and this cycle continues.

Along with these “e” initiatives there are parallel initiatives such as “curbside” are also picking up well. A person can place an order to the third party agency through their mobile app/website, mentioning the name of the retail outlet/mall(s) of choice and, can receive his/her package on the way home by roadside “curbside” outlet. He saves significant time in finding closer parking for his car, spending few hours together in the mall as well as in the billing line every day/week/month and still have control on what is he buying and from where he wishes to buy.

The most important benefit of both these initiatives is, “lot of valuable time” that a person can save which he can spend on “better things”.

Growth of such initiatives clearly indicates that customer’s convenience is playing major role in growth of e initiative as well as hybrid initiative. The notion of “Time is money” for a customer is really playing very well for the merchants. Any innovations which will add value to the customer convenience are going to be the key to the profound success in retail business.

It is giving rise to tougher competitions. Though competitions are posing bigger challenges in front of merchants, they are benefitting the customers as they are getting more options to choose from. They can carefully compare the prices being offered by different competitors and choose their supplier based on the lowest price offers for the desired brands.

Merchants are making all efforts, to get their existing customers remain associated with them for any of their shopping needs. But due to price wars and competitive quality of service customers may not be in a position to appreciate the affinity with a single merchant.

## Online selling Trends

Shopping portals are primarily of two kinds: the ones which are launched by merchants themselves and responsible for attracting and retaining customer base in order to remain in the market. In this case the extent to which benefits can be provided are based on how well the merchant is financially doing and what is his appetite to face the brutal price competition.

The second category of portals is the ones which are launched by some third party organizations (example: Amazon, Alibaba) and provide online platform for merchants across the region to promote the sale of their goods using it. In this case the benefits to customers are provided by the merchants who are hosting their products on the online platform and the owner of hosting platform earn their money by charging some commission from merchants for enabling their business on the hosted platform.

The self-hosted portals, incur considerable additional expenses as they have to manage the IT services behind the online portal, in addition to their actual business. But they have a better opportunity to create their brand proposition, as they are known by their portal name. Also they are free to apply/change their shopping/pricing/discounting rules.

Third party portals on the other hand enable even smaller merchants to take their products to the masses and thus help upcoming businesses/product/services to grow faster using their infrastructure. They, on the other hand are restricted on the pricing/discounting rules. Also their own brand name may get shadowed by the brand name of the third party portal on which they are running the business. They can run only those shopping schemes which are provided by hosting platform.

Materialization of a customer to a merchant is the result of

* Lot of advertisements/promotional campaigns to establish themselves in the market as a brand
* Continuous efforts of attracting new customers and engaging them by offering competitive prices
* Assured quality of products/services being offered.
* Collaboration with payment instruments( credit card providers, PayPal, apple pay etc.) to provide attractive payment options
* Customer’s earlier buying experience with the same merchant.

Among the above mentioned contributors of successful business, the last contributor is a result of all earlier contributors.; i.e. Unless customer gets good quality service from a ‘well known’ merchant ,at a discounted price he may not be fully satisfied with the merchant.

In order to get a customer into habit of buying products always form same merchant, gathering of his multiple experiences with same merchant is the key to the success. Merchants are spending hell lot of money just for this purpose.

A concrete step towards building multiple good experiences with a merchant is to sell good quality products/services so as to enable customer consider same merchant when same products/services are needed. Consider a portal selling vegetables and fruits (bigbasket.com). If customer gets good quality fresh vegetables and fruits from a merchant he would surely go back to same merchant next time. This is how long term affiliation can be built between merchant and his customers.

But selling good quality products alone may not ensure customers’ long term association as

* Multiple merchants may be selling good quality products.
* Branded products have established quality standards. So customer may not see any advantage of buying them from a specific merchant instead of other.

## Buying Trends

When we consider patterns in customer buying of their needs, primarily two buying trends emerge out based on their need patterns.

### Instantaneous Buying

Few products are required by the customers on need basis and nature of need may be spontaneous, triggered by some incident or occasion. Customer buys a product as a response to this trigger. Example: Customer buying a new headphone when his earlier one breaks down OR he wishes to upgrade to a latest one OR he/she wishes to gift it to someone.

Customer buys a new mobile handset as a result of breakdown of earlier one OR he/she wishes to upgrade to a newer version with more speed and capabilities.

Customer buys furniture when he is fed up of using the existing one OR it is broken OR it does not match the new colour scheme/theme which he/she has adopted for his house OR when he buys a new house.

Due to spontaneity of need and its trigger/event based nature, periodicity of buying such products is not fixed. Usually products purchased in instantaneous buying patterns last longer/used for relatively longer period. Next time when buying the product under same category, customer’s choice may have changed due to changing trends. Example: A customer who had bought a Nokia Lumia phone (Windows based) may want to opt for an Android phone, as it is currently more popular and then try for some other brand. Similar behaviour may be observed while buying fashion apparels (Jeans, trousers etc.).

Similar to periodicity and choice customer’s association with merchant may also change. Customer may not buy the product from the same merchant every time. He/she will first surf available product catalogues provided by different merchants, compare prices and then decide from which merchant the product should be purchased. For non-branded/trivial products where price variations are huge, lowest offered price is usually most significant determination factor.

Thus customer’s association with merchant for buying a product is more “instantaneous” in nature. Customer approaches desired merchant (either physically or on online portal) makes his purchase and walks away. There is no commitment from either side that purchase of same/related/similar product next time will be done by that customer from the same merchant.

As customer’s affinity cannot be ensured in sale of these type of products, the main revenue/profit determination factor is the volume of sale of these items. Once a customer purchases a product from the merchant, instead of tracking the same customer for probability of him/her coming back to same merchant next time, the merchant focuses on acquiring new customer so that overall volume turnover of sale will increase(at least remains constant). Though by offering lucrative discounts/cash back offers as well as ensuring sale of good quality products, merchants try to create an opportunity for gaining the same customers back repeatedly, there is no science by which the same can be assured and predicted.

Such an “Instantaneous” nature of business poses multiple challenges in front of merchants.

The first and foremost challenge is to keep the business in a predictable state. Merely increasing customer base for some period does not suffice the need as such as growth may be unpredictable/short lived. A merchant would be considered to be doing bad if a customer who has purchased some products from him in past does not turn up again to the same merchant. So even if merchant’s business is growing due to acquisition of new customers, its stability will always be a question mark, if at least some percent of earlier customer do not come back to him.

Second challenge is associated with keeping control on offered prices by controlling expenses and waste. Merely making efforts to gain new customers does not enable merchant build precise business forecasts, because probable new customers are in thin air and it is impossible to predict if they will really materialize. There may be even tougher challenges associated with demand due to varying customer density as well as varying needs from new coming customers for each product across geographies, periods and demography. For example customer base in cities prefer different product brands than those in small towns. Moreover due to difference in usage patterns the consumption is different.

Unpredictable demands adversely impact procurement of goods, inventory management, operating expenses and may lead to either customer dissatisfaction due to “out of stock” kind of situations or lot of wastage due to expiries of batches of goods. Discounted prices are determined mostly based on certain demand predictions and assuming assured revenue/profits. Such an unpredictability shatters these assumptions and ultimately they may result into vast underperforming of business on revenue and profit fronts. Unpredictable demand also significantly impacts operating expense per unit of goods, as utilization of resources such storage space, electricity charges, expenses on operating staff, expenses related to delivery of goods as part of supply chain etc. are impossible to optimize in case of unpredictable demands.

Different merchants try different options to circumvent around this problem of variable/unpredictable demand. Some may prefer to manage their own stock of inventory using some statistical analysis of historical demand information. Some try out “Just In Time” strategy where they collaborate with regional/local/on site retailers and fulfil local orders through them. In turn the local retailers pay them commission for awarding business.

In first approach the ‘per item’ net profit is inefficient due to inability to control wastages, operating expenses and product pricing.

In second approach merchants rely on the local retailers for inventories being managed by them, quality of the goods as well as services provided by them. They in turn gain much less gain as compared to first approach because they themselves are not dealing with suppliers in wholesale but rather selling items which are purchased by their regional counterparts. As the regional purchases are negligible in volume (as volume is sufficient just to take care of regional needs). Hence the purchase price per unit of goods is much higher as compared to first approach. Benefit of this approach is saving of inventory cost, transportation as well as zero accountability of wastages.

These challenges are much bigger due to their wider reach. They use sophisticated analytics tools to predict the consumption based on historical trends. Though these predictions may provide higher probability of getting closer to the reality but there is no assurance of them meeting the reality because nature of business is instantaneous and there is no guarantee that a customer once made purchase from a merchant will come back again to the same merchant.

Another challenge is to determine the right price of every product being sold. Due to turnover of huge volume of goods, even if a single penny is earned on a unit as profit, it yields millions at the end of a day. The same is inversely true if single penny per unit is lost.

Price of any product is mainly driven by its demand (against all its substitutes) as well as many other factors such as

* Cost incurred (in addition to purchase price of a product) to sell product in market (fixed + variable cost)
* Price/Demand of substitute products
* Price offered by competitor merchants.
* Price/Demand of its complimentary products
* Geographic +demographic aspect determining purchasing power and perceptions of buyer population

Considering “demand” as the primary factor driving offer price, see the following problem for illustration.

If product X has breakeven price (purchase price +costs per unit) of 50 Rs. and MRP as 110 Rs., in order to get profit of 100,000 Rs. On sale of X, at what price it should be sold?

In order to solve one should know the “demand forecast” for product X. If expected demand is 2000 units, then offered price should be 100 Rs. so that.

2000\*100 – 2000\*50 = 2000\*50 = 100000 Rs.

Whereas if expected demand is 4000 then price should be reduced to 75 Rs.

4000\*75 – 4000\*50=4000\*25=100000 Rs.

Now if the prediction system predicts a demand of 4000 Rs., based on which unit price is determined as 75 Rs. and actual sale is 3000 units then profit is reduced to 75000 Rs (which is 25% less than forecasted profit)

3000\*75 -3000\*50=3000\*25=75000 Rs.

If market is very volatile, and merchants are unable to predict demand, they face real challenges in determining prices. The price per unit that they have offered(with some discounts) , anticipating certain sales growth in coming months may turn loss making as the predicated growth did not happen but the cost being constant.

In case of shopping malls they offer the prices based on the geography where they are located. In areas having majority of wealthy people, charging too low price may negatively impact sale as buyers can start suspecting on the quality of products, which are sold at cheaper prices. On the contrary if prices with heavy discounts are not offered in the areas where blue collared people are living, it may negatively impact the sale.

Online shopping sites may not have this luxury of charging different prices in different geographies because the same site is accessible from all locations. Some of them provide the option of selecting the state/city before initiating any purchase just for this purpose.

When a competitor merchant drops price of a product, others have to introspect offer price of the same product, else there is a likelihood of lowest price offering merchant will pull away customers from all.

When cost of substitute of a product (competitor products) goes up it may positively impact its demand. Thus substitute price also plays a major role in price determination.

All the factors discussed above contribute to determination of price being offered to customers. As and when these factors keep changing the offered price keep moving between breakeven price and MRP.

In reality it is extremely difficult to predict customer behaviour in volatile market situation. His buying decisions are impacted by inflation, change of taste, offers by competitors, branding/performance of substitute products etc. In instantaneous world it is extremely difficult to keep offering prices which can keep customers bound to the same merchants.

### Periodic Buying

If one categorizes the range of products being consumed by an average customer for his routine use it can be realized that large range of products is repeatedly required by customers and their usage frequency is predictable. Example: toothpaste is required every month (numbers depending on family size), milk is required daily, washing and body soaps are required in some quantity every month, medicines are required at a prescribed time periods, Protein supplements are required in a prescribed quantity every month, tea/coffee, spices, food items, shaving blades, diapers, mouthwash, dry fruits, biscuits/cookies, corn flakes etc. etc. The list is very long in retail world.

Needless to say, their consumption pattern and hence buying pattern is almost predictable. Each product may have its own consumption frequency.

Example: In my family I consume two Miswak toothpastes, one 200 gm Taj Mahal tea pack,3 packs(10 in each) of Huggies diapers for my baby,4 lux soaps, half kg of rice, half kg of lentil, two body sprays,2 bottles of Dove shampoo,1 Kg sugar,…. Etc.

Other characteristic of periodically needed products is that brand preferences per person/family are usually fixed and rarely change OR they change over a relatively longer duration. Typically people do less experiments with food items and hence their preferences vary rarely.

If you apply the same rule for health associated products such as protein drinks/health supplements, medicines, medicated oils, skin creams, hair dye and certain range of health related products such as diapers you will see that it follows exact same behaviour as described above.

In retail/medicine world there is more probability and likelihood of buying a package of periodic needs from the same merchant and at fixed intervals. Variations is each of their prices across competitors are have negligible impact on buyer’s pocket and hence people do less scrutiny while choosing a merchant for buying these type of products. Of course It should not make merchant take his/her customers granted for an assured business. They should have policies in place which should influence customers to buy more and more items from them and for longer duration.

Hence there is a more likelihood of retaining customer affinity in case of products exhibiting periodic buying patterns. So in addition to increasing volume of sale by acquiring new customers merchant can take efforts to retain existing customers in such category of products.

If you introspect range of all products that you are using in your daily life and list them down you will realize that it has a significant proportion of the products which have been periodically bought by you.

If you compare the impact of demand predictions in managing inventory, operating expense decisions thereby determining right offer price per unit in products exhibiting periodic buying pattern, you will realize that the percentage of accuracy can go up to 70% as compared to products exhibiting random buying pattern and random selection of merchants. This is because a customer buying two Colgate toothpaste a month will continue buying the same volume every month and probably buy them from same customer. In other words you can say that existing periodic buyer may remain associated with same products and with same merchants for much longer duration. Hence their future demand of those products from the same merchant is not just a prediction but it is real.

The scope of this analysis is to focus on the trading of products which exhibit periodic buying pattern and study how their business by means of subscription not only benefits the merchants but also helps maximize gains of the customers.

# Subscription space

As we have seen above in case of periodic buying needs opportunities of building a sustained (not just increasing) customer base by means of establishment of long term relationship between merchant and customers is possible in a large segment of products family.

The opportunities are not obvious just because these products are periodically needed by customers with a relatively fixed periodicity. Since customer has so many options to buy his periodic needs, if he does not have any specific incentive(s) to buy them from the same merchant he may not commit a long term as well as long lasting relationship with a merchant. Merchant needs a business model by which he/she can exhibit respect towards loyal customers by maximizing their gains along with maximizing his own gains. A systematic engagement with every customer where customer gets more & more benefitted by buying more volume of goods and by buying for longer duration from the same merchant, is essential in ensuring predictable and sustainable business for the merchant.

The “Subscription” concept tries to complement the expectations of customers to obtain their “periodic” needs with maximum benefits, with merchants who wish to retain their existing customer base for as long duration as possible (in addition to gaining new customers) in order to ensure a predictable, sustainable and thereby prospering business.

Concept of subscription is not new. It has been popular in publications business since long time. In IT world it has been practiced for SAAS (Software as a Service) business too. There are good evaluation metrics developed for SAAS to measure the effectiveness of the SAAS model. In telecom business, too different tariff plans are based on subscription model.

In simple understanding a ‘subscriber’ is the one who subscribes (registers for periodic receipts) for a set of products (articles and/or magazines in case of publications) or services (software licenses in case of SAAS or mobile plans in case of telecom business) by getting into long term agreement with supplier and keep on receiving these products/services periodically at a predefined interval. Periodic deliveries of desired goods/services save subscriber’s efforts on procuring them every time by new agreements with different suppliers or renewed agreements with existing suppliers.

In publications as well as SAAS business models the market and cost vulnerabilities are limited and predictable as compared to retail business, mainly the one which is related to everyone’s daily needs.

Subscription to products in other periodic selling business (such as retail, health products and medicines etc.) is not yet so popular/ practiced. It may be because in volatile market situations and due to instability of product prices there is no business model available which can ensure sustainable business along with assured(and growing) gains for both stakeholders (subscriber and merchant).

In this analysis we are going to set up expectations from all stakeholders who are keen to deal in subscription business approach. We will then transform these expectations as business objectives for laying out subscription business model. Then we will work on each of these objective and define business elements, rules and processes by each of them for the business to fulfil these objectives. If all of these rules and processes are strictly adhered to by the practitioners they will ensure a sustainable and prosperous business proposition for them.

## Expectations from stakeholders

### Long term association

The basis and intent of subscription concept itself is to establish a long term association of customer with a merchant, where he/she agrees to receive a fixed set of selected products repeatedly at desired intervals. That is where a customer is termed as ‘Subscriber’.

The first obvious advantage for a subscriber of ‘subscribing’ is ‘saving of lot of time and energy on buying his periodic repeatable needs’. An order needs to be placed by customer just once for a fixed length of period, mentioning the number and periodicity of every item being subscribed. Packages with appropriate product contents are delivered to his doorsteps on completion of every delivery period. No periodic visits to malls, no standing in long billing queues, not even periodic ordering online thereby paying different prices for the same product at different times; Order once and you are done for subscription period. Let’s term it as the “Convenience” aspect of subscription model. It is one of the attracting force for a customer to turn into a subscriber. A Merchant who offers a subscription business is expected to enable a subscriber to register for set of products at respective delivery frequencies for a finite subscription period and deliver branded as well as good quality products precisely at the defined frequencies to the customer’s doorsteps.

But merely “convenience” may not ensure long stream of subscribers getting associated with same merchant for longer term. A subscriber may wish to get into a longer term agreement with a merchant also because he/she would expect extra benefits for his/her ‘loyalty’ with same merchant, in addition to the his own “Convenience” aspect described above. Merchant should have proposition to answer “What’s there in it for me?” question from the customers who are intended to get into long term associations with him/her.

### Revised metrics to measure performance

A successful merchant who arranges a business proposition so as to attract such longer term agreements with his customers then have stable and predictable business as he almost precisely knows the demand of each of the products being sold and then can focus his efforts on minimizing wastage as well as negotiating better rates from his suppliers.

Conventional Instantaneous business measures growth in terms of volume of sale. Since it does not offer a facility to remember existing customer base, it does not track the duration and volume of association with each customer. So it merely measures /predicts growth based on actual volume of sale against predicted demand and per unit gain aggregated into total gain.

Subscription business is association centric. And hence health of customer-merchant association is an important metric in measuring success of subscription business. Hence overall performance of subscription business should be measured in terms of volume of incoming (new) customers, duration of merchants association (subscription) with each of them, their purchase volumes (basket sizes), rate of customers churning, and thereby overall revenue, gross and net profit. It means different business proposition is needed here as the intent is to attract new subscribers, retain existing subscriber as long as you can, attract them to buy higher volume of goods per period, reduce churning (as it indicates subscriber dissatisfaction) and measure the success of business not only in terms of attracting high volume of subscribers but also in terms of longer average retention rate and minimum possible churning rate.

If large volume of new subscribers are getting added to merchant’s portfolio, but large volume of subscribers are continuously getting churned out in during their subscription period, then something is going wrong in the business and merchant needs to introspect and correct wherever required.

Since an average customer in subscription agreement typically subscribes for more than one product as well as for more than one time, it is appropriate to forecast and measure the business in terms of subscriptions instead of subscribers. This is because

* Subscriber may subscribe to more than one product per unit period and for definite periodicity and duration.
* The same subscription repeatedly adds to revenue/profit for the agreed subscription period.
* A subscriber can change his total subscriptions one or more times during subscription period resulting into changing revenue for from the same subscriber.

Also if subscribers are changing their product subscriptions multiple times (replacing products, removing products from baskets) during subscription period, it may negatively impact forecasting and management of resources.

### Multidimensional Benefits model

As indicated above merchant needs to answer “What’s there in it for me?” when a customer is intending to turn into a subscriber.

When a customer wants to buy set of products, he may choose products based on two criterions.

* Brand preference: Out of various brands available which brand he/she would like to buy.
* Quality of non-branded products
* Prices and benefits being offered per quantity/duration of subscription

In case of grocery goods, if a subscriber is buying 10 different products, he may be firm about his brand choice for 7 of them, but may be flexible about the brands for remaining 3. These numbers are just for illustration purpose and may vary from subscriber to subscriber. But this behaviour is mostly common across all type of subscribers. Example: As a customer I would not like to use any toothpaste other than Colgate Total, but in case of biscuits I may be flexible. Rather I may wish to try some new brand of biscuits.

Cost sensitive customers are more flexible on brand preference as they may tend to choose the products which provide them more cost saving or some added benefits. The choices (and quantity) are also influenced by the ‘added’ tangible/intangible benefits being offered by merchants. The duration and quantity of subscription gets positively impacted by these added offerings.

The above description may not be applicable to buying of medicines, as they will be mostly bought based on doctor’s prescription (though there too, is a flexibility to buy reputed brands or generic medicines)

Now when the customer wishes to turn into a ‘subscriber’, he will obviously expect some added benefits for getting into long term relationship with merchant.

So what are the benefits that he can expect vs. merchant can offer?

Let’s see what are those few “toppings” (on top of this basic advantage), those can be offered so as motivate customers turn into subscribers.

#### Topping 1: Discounted Price

Since success of subscription business lies in

1. Achieving large subscriber base
2. Ensuring prolonged relationship with each of them
3. Attracting them to buy maximum volume of goods
4. Minimizing churning of existing subscribers

The total benefits to be awarded to subscribers should be determined according to each of these attributes.

A Merchant should be able to offer products at discounted prices (prices lesser than their MRP) as an offering to subscribers for registering subscriptions with that merchant. This discount is to reward his association with merchant. Merchant should have mechanism to calculate the amount of discount per product that can be offered based on performance of that product.

But how will this be different than those in instantaneous business? Even merchants into instantaneous business are also offering products at discounted prices in order to attract customers.

Also if two merchants are providing different discounts on the same product on a given day, should a subscriber choose to subscribe to the merchant offering lesser price? Well, the answer is not so straightforward like it is in instantaneous business.

This is because the total benefits that a subscriber is going to get is not just limited to discounted product prices. As described above the benefit a subscriber is getting will depend upon his duration of subscription, volume of products subscribed, his affinity to the same merchant for the whole agreed duration and his affinity to the same merchant beyond a given subscription but through recurring subscriptions. Let’s see other aspects below.

#### Topping 2: Committed Price/Discount

When a subscriber subscribes to a product for a six monthly/yearly subscription, he/she is registering to receive that product multiple times throughout his subscription period. He/she is doing it because the discounted price offered by the merchant is appearing a good deal to him. The challenge is on the merchant side. Can merchant keep the same price for him throughout the whole subscription period, by which he has attracted that subscriber?

Merchant should set subscription business rules in such a way that he/she will succeed in providing some sort of price commitment at least for some products, if not all. A merchant should mark products for different types of price commitments, based on experience related to their ‘price elasticity’.

Subscription business model should assume three types of product pricing categories which will be offered to subscribers for appropriate products based on how these products react to the changing business demands.

1. Price committed products: many branded products such as tooth pastes or shampoos do not fluctuate greatly on price fronts. Their price gradually increases as response to inflation or increasing demands but the overall rise in a year is either negligible or within acceptable limits. They are termed as “Price Inelastic” products. So the merchant may find it safer to commit prices of such products to subscriber for his/her entire subscription period.

In case of price committed products, price of a product **committed to a subscriber** should remain same until end of his current subscription period. This should hold true even if the product/merchant is incurring losses on that product with the offered price OR price of that product gets changed one/many times during that subscription period.

The idea here is not to commit same price to all the subscribers subscribing at all the time. Every hour/day/week, based on certain supply demand dynamics a new offered price is published for every subscriptionable product. At that instance whosoever is subscribing for that product will get the recently published offered price. Thus subscribers subscribing to the same product but on a different day may subscribe at different offered price. Since the maximum allowed subscription period should be restricted to a reasonable period (say one year) the committed price is expected to be served only during that period. After exhausting of current subscription period if subscriber wishes to continue with his/her order he/she will need to renew the subscription (contract) where latest price for each product will be committed to him/her.

Also after publishing a product price on a day to which multiple subscribers have subscribed, if price undergoes change due to increased demand or due to change in purchase price due to inflation, the newly registered subscribers will get new offered price. But earlier committed subscribers (with old price) should be served with the older price until the end of their current subscription contract period.

1. Percentage discount committed products: Some products may fluctuate more frequently and considerably but they provide relatively constant margin. These are “Price Elastic” products. Committing absolute price for entire subscription period may be risky but instead it is relatively safer to commit percentage discount on their latest price.

In case of percentage discount committed product the subscriber should get a constant committed percentage discount on the latest MRP/offered price at the time of every delivery. In this case the actual price to be paid by subscriber will vary as the percentage discount is calculated on latest price at the time of every delivery.

1. No commitment products: Many products mostly categorized under primary needs such as food grains, edible oil, sugar vary so unpredictably on price front that it is impossible to either commit price or percentage discount for them for entire subscription period. They are highly “Price Elastic” and gains on them are also not ensured.

In case of no commitment products the subscriber has to pay latest offered price on the product at every delivery. Some time it can be much lesser than the one shown at the time of subscription and sometimes it may be considerably more.

Few words on the notion of committed price. No product is inflation proof and it is almost certain that after committing a price/percent discount on a product, the price of that product may increase resulting into loss of profit or even loss to the merchant. Then why does merchant need to commit anything to subscribers?

As we have discussed earlier, layered benefits of subscribers proportional to their engagement model is the most important USP for the success of subscription business and products are not just being sold once but they are subscribed for a repetitive sale. In such case changing their offer price based on dynamics of market may ruin the subscriber benefits and thereby the intent behind subscribing to the product. Moreover it may generate a feeling of being cheated among subscribers.

Also when few subscribers are receiving a product at an offered price relatively lesser than its current offer price (or even purchase price) resulting into loss to the merchant, the loss is only limited to few subscribers and only until end of their subscription period. If merchant has sent maximum allowed subscription period to be, say one year, then the price/discount commitment is going to last only up to maximum one year. Thus the loss is not long lasting.

Moreover in case of loss (or loss of profit) like situation to the merchant the price should be able to correct itself by use of appropriate pricing algorithm. In the situation where demand is increasing but profit is diminishing because product is being offered at price lower than its worth, the newly calculated offer price is expected to be more than earlier offered price so as to bring the product up to its worth. Such an upward price revision should automatically compensate for the loss due to lower price quoted earlier and bring product business into profit figures.

The same product may be categorized differently in different countries in either of the above three categories, depending upon goods producing percentage and demand pattern. So merchant need to mark them accordingly, depending upon country in which products are getting sold.

#### Topping 3: Volume based /Duration based benefits

Though the discounted pricing model offers gains to subscribers, it does not distinguish subscribers who are subscribing for larger volume of items against those who opt for much lesser volume. Similarly it does not distinguish between subscribers having much longer subscription period as against the others. Thus product offerings at a discounted prices would be necessary but not sufficient to attract people for subscriptions.

A subscriber who is subscribing to longer term association with merchant as compared with other subscribers should be rewarded benefits in proportion to his/her duration of association with merchant.

A subscriber who is subscribing to more volume of good per subscription period should be rewarded benefits in proportion the volume of subscription.

A subscriber who has completed agreed subscription duration and adhered to agreed subscription content should be getting all above benefits. A subscriber who may be revoking his/her subscription before end of subscription period should get benefits in proportion to active subscription period. Similarly a subscriber changing his subscription content during subscription period should be rewarded benefits in proportion to revenue that he/she is contributing to the merchant.

#### Topping 4: Loyalty based benefits

All above benefits are limited to an active subscription contract. What if a subscriber who completed his current subscription and renewed it again. His loyalties towards the merchant shown be recurring renewals of subscriptions should be rewarded in terms of some benefits associated with loyalty.

The above multi-layered benefits model which greatly benefits not only to subscribers but also merchants is only possible in subscription business approach. Those subscribers who are contributing to more assured business for merchant as well as to maximizing his/her gain will be in turn maximize their own savings in form of multilevel benefits as described above.

Another intangible benefit of this multilevel benefits model is that it is not possible to do an ‘apple to apple’ comparison between the gains by two subscribers. This is where one can answer to the question asked earlier, that should the subscriber subscribe to a merchant merely based on lowered offered price than others.

# Objectives of Subscription Business Model

Based on the expectations described above let’s lay down the main objectives in front of the stakeholders if they are to be benefitted by following subscription business approach. These objectives are based on their obvious expectations from the long term relationship notion in subscription business model as well as few innovative advantages which are available due to nature of business model

## Subscriber centric objectives

### Quality

Regardless of nature of business (periodic or instantaneous) quality of purchased goods has always been and will always be the first criteria for any customer. In case of branded products this is not needed to be handled by merchants as customers are already associated with some brands or the other. This may be an issue for non-branded products such as fruits and vegetables.

So merchant has to ensure that whatever products (branded or no branded) products he/she is offering they should be of good quality. Many new/upcoming products get launched in market with highly competent prices as well as lucrative margins for merchants. Hence merchant as well as subscribers may get tempted to offer them/buy them. But if these are found to be of inferior quality subscribers will not blame their own choices but will blame the merchant who offered these products.

### Convenience

Lot of convenience, by buying things online has been one of the main motivation factors for customers.

* Subscribers will be happy buying their periodic needs online through a self-intuitive user interface, so that they will save lot of their time going to market for shopping of these items, standing in long billing queues etc.
* Subscribers will want to get the purchased goods to be delivered at their doorsteps, mostly on precise time. These are periodic needs; so they may not wait for the goods to be delivered later than the day when they need these products.
* If subscribers are subscribing for multiple products, they may not need all of them at the same interval as each of their consumption rate may be different. Example: customer may want two toothpastes per month but need toothbrushes to be delivered every four months.

So they will need different items to be delivered to them, at different times, closer to their need time. It means that subscription business should manage multiple deliveries spaced with different intervals for a registered subscription, each of them having their own periodicity and these deliveries are received by subscriber close to their needs. In order to optimize on the delivery cost overlapping product deliveries should be clubbed together (example: items to be delivered quarterly should be delivered along with every third monthly delivery, in case of weekly deliveries along with monthly deliveries with the same subscription every 4th weekly delivery should be clubbed with monthly delivery and so on.) and the timetable of deliveries will be projected upfront to the subscriber and his/her consent is taken on this delivery schedule.

* Payment of procuring goods is a challenging endeavour in subscription business. This is because subscriber will be subscribing for deliveries for now as well as for coming days/months. It may not be appropriate to charge all subscribers in advance for the whole subscription. This is because total subscription amount may be huge which a subscriber may not be ready to invest upfront. Moreover as subscriber may be altering his/her orders during subscription period, due amount will also be varying. On the other hand it may be annoying to claim the dues periodically through monthly reminders. He/she should be provided easier options of payment suiting to his/her appetite. Some may prefer majority of payment to be done in advance whereas others may prefer cash on delivery kind of options. Few may make some payment in advance but process the remaining payment in instalments. The only rule that subscribers should be made aware is, that they will get only those deliveries for which merchant has received/is receiving payment (if cash on delivery option is chosen). So subscribers at least need to pay in advance for any upcoming delivery.
* Money should not be the only instrument for making payments. When subscribers are subscribing for large volume of goods or for longer subscription duration they should be rewarded with appropriate number of reward points proportional to the volume and/or duration of subscription. In addition recurring renewal of subscriptions with same merchant should also enable them to earn reward points on account of their loyalty with same merchant. They should have an option to pay their dues using the accumulated reward points. It is synonymous to an investor making investment in a business to grow it and gains returns from the business in proportion to its growth and his/her contribution to the growth. It will be a very big “feel good” factor for subscribers that their current/earlier associations with a merchant is paying them good returns and thus motivates them to retain or even extend this association for longer period and for bigger volume of orders.

### Benefits

We have already discussed in multi layered business model that subscribers should be benefitted on account of his/her association for merchant, for the duration of association and for the volume of purchases that he has been registering with merchant. The benefits model should attract a subscriber to subscribe for more, to subscribe for longer duration and to subscribe again and again with the same merchant.

* For periodical needs such as grocery items or medicines, subscribers may prefer to subscribe for them if these are offered at some discounted prices. This is how a subscriber will maximize his/her gain as the same item will be shipped to him periodically for longer duration with discounted price. As merchant is dealing with large volume of goods he should manage to determine the offer price of every product based on its demand vs supply dynamics and gains coming from it in such a way that he/she should be able to offer subscribers most of the products with attractive discounted prices and still be able to registers huge profits with each of them.
* Customer happiness may ruin away if merchants start charging considerable shipping charges on the delivery packages. In case the shipping charge grows proportional to package size/weight it may further add to customer dissatisfaction. The sole purpose of making a subscriber subscribe for more and more items will ruin away if shipping charges increase proportional to package size. They may find it more appropriate to buy these items from a nearby mall (although it is less convenient).It is for the merchant to manage operating expenses in such as manner their effect should not be visible to the subscribers through some sort of shipping charges.
* The most difficult problem to handle in case of subscription model is the product price to charge to a subscriber during whole subscription period. Should subscriber pay the same price for a product throughout subscription contract? If price of a product increases, what will be its impact on existing subscriptions? The price commitment model described above should be adopted here to categorize products according to their price elasticity and try to offer maximum products with some form of commitment of price benefits.

### Value added benefits

Some segment of customer base perceives different products at lesser prices than their offered (discounted) prices. Such price sensitive customers may compare offered prices of different branded products at different shopping malls/portals and selectively buy their needs from different shopping malls/portals so as to maximize their overall benefit. Also their choice of a merchant keeps on changing based on who is providing maximum benefits for each of their needed product at every time.

If customers are provided ‘package’ level benefit as an alternative to/in addition to product level benefits, they will be tempted to add more items in their package(because more the package amount more is the benefit),thereby buying all their needs from same merchant. Also the more time (more subscription duration) they keep buying from the same merchant more will be their benefits.

Notion of package level benefits is that, when a subscriber buys a goods worth ‘X’ amount and other subscriber buys worth ‘2X’ amount, each of them will be awarded some package level benefit proportional to the amount of goods each of them is subscribing to. In this case the second subscriber should be appraised with more benefits, as he/she is contributing more to merchant’s overall revenue and profit. This is how second customer will get a feeling of added gain and it will add to his satisfaction level.

### Rewards for loyalty

If a subscribing is periodically buying his needs from the same merchant, is he/she being rewarded for his/her long term affiliation with that merchant?

Looking little deeper in this kind of relationship, a subscriber is getting into long term agreement with the merchant where he promises to buy certain (perhaps same) set of products periodically for the agreement duration. So the merchant is awarded with an assured business for a fixed duration. It is resulting into merchant making more precise demand predictions, negotiate better on price front, reduce losses, optimize on operating expenses and maximize self-gain. Hence such a subscriber loyalty with the merchant should be rewarded in some form or the other. It can be in the form of additional discounts or cash back schemes or loyalty/reward points etc. Thus this loyalty makes the subscriber win more benefits on top of product level and volume based benefits.

As merchant is automatically wining a long term relationship with existing subscriber, he can focus more on winning new subscribers.

There should be strategies in place which will compute the loyalty units for every customer based on duration of their agreement as well as number of renewals of agreements. They should then be converted in the form of benefits such as redemption points, added discounts, gifts etc.

## Merchant centric Objectives

### Sustainable customer base

In case merchant attracts customers to get into such long term association it will be a complete business transformation for him.

His/her relentless efforts and investments to obtain new customers as well as retain existing customers will be greatly saved as customers are turning into ‘subscribers’ with the intent of not just buying once but buy periodically and hence remain associated with him for a longer duration.

If merchant takes appropriate measures to ensure longer term association of existing subscribers by proportionately rewarding them for their loyalty/relationship, it helps create affinity for him among subscribers. Such a relationship is much more precious than just a momentary commercial association for the purpose of trading.

Moreover such relationship also enables him to know his customers better, by knowing their choices/preferences, their usage patterns, their periodic volume needs, cost vs. brand preferences etc. This data is extremely valuable asset for analysing and categorizing customer base, so as to offer them better value proposition based on their personas. This too will help increase affinity towards him.

So when merchant is adopting subscription business model the model should provide him appropriate metrics which are not just useful to measure business growth but should also be useful in

* Analysing customer behaviour
* Current buying trends
* Customer expectations
* Individual product performance graph
* Identification of products which prove themselves eligible for subscription model whereas some others which may prove to be not suitable for trading through this model
* Results of efforts put on cost optimization
* Areas where investments need to be increased instead of spend optimizations

Merchant can make strategy decisions based on these inputs and tune the business so as to improve further on current improvements as well as avoid policies which are hindering customer experience.

### Optimizations through Precise Predictions

Through subscription business model merchant should be more equipped to make considerably precise predictions related to business forecast. 60-70% of his future business will be the actual active subscriptions, which are going to continue in near future. Remaining 30-40% will be predictions about new subscriptions based on current trend. This is how the future prediction are much more precise as compared to those made in case of instantaneous business.

Such precise predictions will make him better prepared to manage goods as well as resources well. As he almost exactly knows how many subscribers to serve, at what periodicity, with what quantity, he can precisely order goods for current/future period.

Moreover he knows how many baskets/packages are to be delivered, at what periodicity; with what weight (per basket) he can precisely budget for transportation/delivery cost. Such information not only helps him manage budget for theses expense but also help him negotiate better with logistics vendors, if any and ensure better rates from them.

Due to predictable demands and logistics, merchant is in a better position to optimize on personnel cost of infrastructure etc. etc.

As the inflow and outflow of goods is assured, he can negotiate better with suppliers (may be getting into long term supply agreement with them). It will help him reduce wastage cost to minimum. In turn he can launch his products at competitive prices which will be difficult for his competitors to beat.

The reduction of wastage which is improvising his gains can be used to feedback subscribers in terms of discounts as well as different form of benefits and this process should be recursively goes on which is improving customer satisfaction more and more.

### Optimization of Operating Cost

Imagine that a shopping portal is trading in instantaneous mode. Customers purchase products and those are shipped to them. Assume that it is dealing with approximately 10,000 customers per month. Some customers make purchase of multiple items per instance, but many of them purchase single item at an instance. So merchant is making approximately 7000 to 10000 deliveries per month. In this it is shipping 10000 to 20000 items (i.e. approximately 1.5 to 2 items per delivery). If average shipping cost per delivery is 40 Rs. then shipping cost per item is approximately 20 Rs.

In all the cases, it may not be possible to absorb the shipping cost by merchant as the price of the content in a delivery is not bringing enough gains for the merchant so as to absorb such a high shipping cost. So in case of shopping of less expensive items, the shipping cost is separately charged to the buyer.

Now assume that same portal is dealing in subscription mode and with same number (10,000) of subscribers. So it will be making 10,000 deliveries. But as subscription is providing better benefits if more content is subscribed to, a shipment may contain 10-20 items. So in same number of deliveries, around 100,000 to 2, 00,000 items are getting delivered. Even if average shipping cost per delivery is 60 Rs. (as weight of delivery increased due to more items in it), cost per item is 3 to 6 Rs.

Due to repetitive nature of ensured business, and cost being less as compared to price of item, it will be more possible absorb this cost in the available gains.

In case future deliveries to be made are already known in advance, logistics costs (storage, shipping, routing etc.) can be better optimized. Such optimizations can add huge gains into merchant’s wallet.

As a summary, merchants can increase their profits by optimizing their costs per item sold. As we have seen above, a merchant in subscription business has better avenues for the cost optimizations than those available in instantaneous business.

Hence the expectation is, given the average shipping cost per kg of delivery anywhere in the region subscription business model should be capable of deriving per unit shipping cost for each product. This per unit cost should be proportional to the price of the product, though delivery itself is evaluated based on its weight. This is how more expensive products will absorb more portion of shipping cost (for the package) as compared to their less expensive products. Here the assumption is that products with more selling price usually yield more absolute profit (may not be always true).

### Value based benefits instead of competitive benefits

In instantaneous business world, different merchants compete with each other to attract more customers as well as get customers into habit of using them as de-facto shopping channel.

It gives rise to price wars. Many times merchants are ready to bear huge losses, by offering products at dirt cheap prices. Because they think that, cheapest prices visible on their shopping sites, will get their customers into a habit of buying anything from them. Game theory based pricing determination models are being used for this purpose.

In subscription approach the ‘offered’ price of every product should be the function of all of the following

1. Breakeven price of the product, and margin available( between MRP and breakeven price)
2. Current demand of the product
3. Time of subscription(every day new/same price may be available for a product)
4. Total basket (delivery per period) size ,value
5. Duration of subscription.
6. Subscriber’s loyalty with merchant (total duration of all subscriptions with same merchant, number of subscription renewals etc.)

So same product will be offered to subscribers at different resultant prices based on all above criterion.

Due to this it is not possible to compare price of a product on different sites and determine the cheapest option, because price is not only calculated on product characteristics but also on the subscriber’s and subscription’s characteristics.

Instead of giving haphazard discounts on individual products (just for beating competition), benefits for a subscriber can be better organized based on volume of purchase, duration of their association, loyalty, brand loyalty etc. Such a multi layered benefit model not only attracts more subscription but also tempts subscribers to buy more goods as well as extend association for longer term.

### Intelligent Pricing Engine

As we have seen above the net value that a subscriber has to pay for a product is result of multiple factors.

Abut among all these multi-layered benefits the offer price is a component which does not depend on subscription dynamics (such as volume of subscription, duration of subscription, recurrence of subscription etc.) but more on market dynamics.

As per rules of economics except monopolistic products, price of a product is mainly driven by its demand. When a product is launched in the market it starts its journey with a certain MRP. The MRP typically has taken into consideration all the overheads it has to bear before it reaches into customers hands. Due to along supply chain from the manufacturer of a product to the customer, every element in this chain reserves some gain before passing the product ahead to the next element in the chain. That is how a regional distributor receives the at a certain purchase price, he applies his margin onto it and then passes the item to the local distributor with a higher purchase price. Finally it reaches into customer’s hands at an MRP.

Assuming that large subscription business may break the long supply chain and directly purchase large volume from manufacturer or from main supplier, the merchant will have large margin in his hands behind each product.

Merchants usually pass on some portion of this profit to the customers, depending upon how much yield the product is bringing to him.

For subscription business the same model will follow with few modifications to the pricing decisions. Merchant may start with lowest possible offer price, by reserving only a small portion of total available margin just to ensure some profit and passing the rest to subscribers so as to attract large volume of subscribers.

Depending upon increase in demand he will calculate profit that the product is making with current offer price. If profit is increasing he may decrease the price further (if margin allows him) or keep it the same. At certain demand the total operating expenses per unit of product may outperform the profit figure (because shipping charges, storage expense etc. will increase with demand) and profit may start decreasing. In such situation where demand is increasing and profit is decreasing he will make moderate stepwise increase in the offer price to ensure stable or gradually increasing profit. Now product has achieved new normal offered price. When the same situation arises again (demand is increasing but profit is decreasing) the offer price will be increased to the new normal and so on.

Instead of increase in demand, if the demand starts decreasing (due to churning of existing subscribers) resulting into loss of profit the merchant should decrease offer price so as to attract more subscribers. He may continue doing so until demand is decreasing but only until the offer price reaches equal to the breakeven price (cost per unit of product to the merchant). If still demand continues to decrease then he may decide to incur loss and continue decreasing offer price or he may decide to take that product off the subscription business.

Such as precise calibrated offer price calculation may not be possible at right triggers manually. Merchant may need sophisticated algorithms implemented by software systems who will be responsible to tracking the price and demand of each product and come up with price change recommendations at appropriate times.

### Intelligent Budgeting and corrections

As 70% of the future business is getting registered in advance and remaining 30% is forecasted based on this 70%, the precision in the forecast is higher and it should drive budget provisioning for different cost headers/activities.

Due to precise predictions it may be possible that merchant may be fixing the purchase volume of each product in the beginning by negotiating with suppliers. Hence provision of purchase should be recommended by the business model instead of merchant calculating how much investment is needed for purchasing of goods.

Similarly 70% of the delivery schedule as well as volume per package is known expenses on delivery should also be recommended.

Same applies to investment on goods space, electricity/other operational charges as well as need for staff to manage the business should be recommended by business.

It may be obvious that some products are doing bad and hence more efforts and money will be needed to boost their sale (before concluding on taking them out of the business). If forecasts are revealing bad performers and difference between target performance and actual performance of each of them, business should recommend how much provision should be made on an effort to boost their sale.

Moreover the business should tell the merchant when a slab of budgeted amount should be released for its consumption. Even if annual provision under each expense category has been made, one should also be able to determine how much of the provision should be released in each cycle and how are the cycles scheduled. This way merchant will be notified if out of cycle release of some provisioned amount under a specific category needs to be released. It means that spend of budgeted money for a category is not going as per the predicted path and there is some intermediate surge in demand of money due to some deviation in business. Such an indication of deviation may be a good or bad sign. For example if merchant comes to know that he has to release additional money for purchase of additional goods stock much ahead of its anticipated purchase date, it is a good sign because it indicates that business is growing much faster than anticipated. Whereas if merchant needs to release additional money for branding/advertising expenses of a product or for making provision for additional discounts, out of schedule it means that product may be doing really bad business and hence needs urgent monetary support to boost its sale.

Another approach is to feed back the deviations in anticipated/forecasted demands to the business so that business model should be able to recalculate revised needs for additional/lesser monetary provisions. For example: Sale of a product is exponentially growing much ahead of its forecasted demand. It indicates more provision for purchase of its additional stock. It may also indicates more provisions for delivery expenses as more subscribers are connected to business than anticipated.

If the business rules in subscription business model help the merchant make the budgetary decisions, he will be able to equip himself very well against the dynamics in the market.

### Products collaboration model

In banking business, few wealthy people keep their income in banks in the form of deposits and earn interest on it. Bank uses the same money to lend it to the needed but deserving people and earn interest from them. Bank charges more interest from the lenders than what it pays to the depositors and thus makes money to run the business.

Here the proposition is to have a centralized “Nodal” account where ‘well doing’ products will deposit their “excess” profits. This money is lend to the new coming products or non performing products to launch/boost their business. It can be used on advertising expenses on these products or offering additional/promotional discounts. The “Donor” products will gain credit points in proportion to the contributions that they have made and the “Lender” products will lose credit points in proportion to the amount they lend. This credit history will be used to clearly distinguish Top rated products from the low performing products. In case of top performing products merchant may wish to adopt different pricing strategy due to their dominant/monopolistic business growth. In case of low performing products merchant may work on appropriate business recovery measures or may decide to take some of them from subscription business.

# Product Centric Subscription Model

The overall business can be looked at as an atomic entity and all the predictions, calculations; decisions are done at business level. Business tells its overall forecasts, its procurement needs for different products, it overall revenue, profits/losses and performance is measured at a business level. Business centric metrics such as percentage revenue growth/loss per period, percentage profit growth per period, percentage subscription churn per period, average monthly recognized revenue at business level, percentage MRR churn, Average revenue per subscriber etc. can be tracked at business level.

Demands vary from product to product so that some products are doing great and some are struggling to compete. When a subscriber wishes to buy number of products to be added to the basket, it may be combination of preferred brands for primary needs and cost effective brands for secondary needs. So it would be strongly advisable to measure success or failure of a subscription business in terms of dynamics associated with each product, instead of measuring it at business level.

Product centric subscription business model looks at overall business as composition of businesses of multiple individual products and their impacts on each other.

Each product has its own story to tell. It may be doing very well because it is among the top brands, or it may just have appeared in the market and trying to establish its identity. A product may be providing great margins per unit to the merchant but its overall sale is moderate, resulting into limited overall gain. Alternatively, a product may be providing very narrow margin per unit but its sale volume is very high, resulting into considerable gains for the merchant. Some products bring great profits whereas others bring great revenue. A product may be very price elastic. It means a small variation in its price may result into huge variation in its demand. Similarly some product may be price inelastic, resulting into no significant change in demand for a moderate change in its price.

A product does not operate independently in the market. It has various forms of correlations with other products. These relationships aid in determining the price and performance of a product.

Some products are more essential than other. Clever marketing can make a less essential product more essential by making people habituated to it. Some products are required more frequently than others.

## Rules for product centric subscription model

The business model proposed in this thesis is product centric business model. Following rules for a product will provide its characteristics as well as responsibilities in order to operate in subscription business

1. Forecast will be made for every product individually, depending upon DNA of the product. It will include how many subscriptions it may win during the period and how much churning in its subscription may take place. The actual performance for a product will compete with forecast and periodically ‘corrects’ the forecast based on the actual trends. Thus forecast keep on getting more précises and tougher for the actual product performance to follow/overcome it. Overall business forecast will be an aggregation of forecasts of individual products being traded.
2. Every product will maintain its own profit/loss account. Any new sale of a product registers appropriate profit in its own account, whereas any churn registers loss.
3. A product knows about all its substitutes and complements. It can decide its price by taking into consideration price of its substitutes as well as complements.
4. A Product’s account maintains list of its own price buckets. Price bucket is any offered price of a product (for the given purchase price and MRP) to which one or more subscribers have been subscribed. When a price is offered newly, number of subscribers subscribes for the product for this price. Until these is a single active subscription association with price, price bucket will remain active. When all subscriptions associated with a price get exhausted, the price bucket expires.

Since product prices are calculated periodically and may be changing very frequently, at any given point a product may have multiple active price buckets. Total subscription to the product should be the aggregation of subscriptions associated with all active price buckets.

1. A Product can be a good revenue generating contributor, whereas some other product may be a good profit generating contributor. Appropriate contribution targets will be used to trigger price changes. Revenue generating products will change their price when their actual revenues grow/fall by x% than current forecasts. Similarly profit generating products will receive price change trigger when their profits grow/fall by x% than forecast.
2. Every product bears its own share of different cost/expenses incurred for running the business. Depending on special maintenance needs, some of these expenses may vary from product to product. Example: Milk needs refrigeration whereas body soap does not have any such special needs. Hence milk may have to carry additional share of electricity expenses.
3. Every product reports its own performance metrics by which its performance can be analysed.
4. Every product decides next sale targets for itself based on forecasting using his historical actual performance data. Also it decides the trigger event (decision point) to change its offer price, based on how much variation from the forecasted targets should trigger the price change.
5. In case a product is doing better than expected, then it contributes some of its additional gains to a central repository. The product which is not doing well it can borrow some money from this repository so as to recover from losses.

Thus performance of an overall business can be granularly tracked as aggregation of performance of every individual product offered for subscription.

Since we have given so much weightage to product portfolio, it is essential to understand different types of products so as to understand how to make any decisions about them while deciding their targets, budget provisions etc.. Following categories describe all such distinctions.

## Product Categories.

### Essential vs. Optional products

Depending on region of sale, few products can be categorized as essential (mandatorily needed) products whereas few others may be considered as optional (occasionally/optionally needed) products. This categorization cannot be universal and needs to be fine-tuned as per geographic needs.

Example: In India Tea can be considered as an essential product, as drinking tea is an inevitable part of Indian culture in most areas. But the same is not true in case of European countries. Here Corn Flakes may fall into essential category.

### High/Low demand products

Among the range of products being sold, some of them are well established brands, whereas others are relatively less popular and trying to establish themselves.

The high demand products ensure a sustainable sale as well as steady state growth. Their sale volume is also relatively higher than their low demand counterparts.

The popular brands usually offer lesser profit margins for the merchants (due to their monopoly) as compared to their less popular competitors.

So a merchant needs to balance the sales targets as well as sale prices for both types of brands, so as to ensure repeatable and consistent profit margins on the reliable brands whereas putting extra efforts on enhancing the sale of less popular brands, thereby making more money on them. For enhancing the sale of medium/low demand brands typical ways to maximize sale is by offering them at discounted prices or provide some offers/schemes (example: one free on the other) on them etc.

Example: Colgate is a more popular brand than Pepsodent, Nescafe is a higher demand product brand than its competitor Bru, Dove is getting more popular than Rexona etc.

### High/Low velocity /frequency products

Some products are needed in daily life and hence their consumption is faster. It results into more frequent demands for them.

Example: Toothpaste, washing powder, deodorants and corn flakes are more needed than cosmetics, biscuits, tooth brushes.

High frequency products are those which are ordered at low periodicity (2 per month or 4 per quarter) than the low frequency products (tooth brushes (once per half year per person), lipstick (one per quarter) etc.

Even if some of the high frequency items are getting consumed with low demands (than their competitors) they may yield better revenues due to higher frequency nature.

### Generation influencing products

Some product brands influence specific generations. Example: Pampers and Huggies are inevitable brands for children in the range of 0 – 24 months, Axe/Old Spice/Fogg deodorants attract young generation, whereas kiwi shoe polish is more used among middle aged members.

Companies promote their brands through various innovative ways of sales promotion due to which even if a product is not an essential commodity item, but still attracts handsome demand among people under specific age/income classes.

### Seasonal products

Some products do business in specific seasons.

Example: Fruit squashes and Sharabats are sold mainly during summer season. Demand for Food mixes (Git sweet mixes), chocolates increases mainly in festive seasons (Diwali, Christmas).

In some cases some brands are capable of recovering their dues in merely few months, which is their peak season. Setting targets for them is not as uniform per month as the other categories, but higher targets are set for their peak seasons and negligible targets are set for other months.

### Substitutes and Complements

Some products invite sale of their peers, and this behaviour can be understood by analysing historical data.

Example: Does a customer ordering schezwan sauce always order noodles? Does a customer ordering condensed milk mostly orders dry fruits? Does a customer always order sugar when he/she orders coffee?

Based on the territory the sale is intended, historical data analysis can reveal such facts. In which the product which creates need for a peer product can be considered as a sale promoter for the peer product and should deserve a due credit while setting the price for it. These are the Complements.

On the contrary, some products are competitors of each other. Think of apple juice and orange juice. If a customer has ordered apple juice there is a less likelihood that he will order orange juice. These are called substitutes.

If demand for a product decreases, there is a more likelihood that demand of few of its substitutes may increase. Thus it may not just impact the price decisions for that product itself but also impacts price decisions of its substitutes.

### Regional products

Some products are sold more in some region than the others. Example: Sambar Masala may be less popular/regular in southern states(because people prefer to use homemade masala) but will sale more in metro cities as well as in northern regions, Condensed milk is more sought in Northern states due to more frequent sweets making.

For an online portal it is very challenging to offer regional prices at an item level but this categorization may help us in determining basket level offers based on number of regional products contained in it.

# Elements of subscription business model

As we have created the ground for subscription business model in a well detailed manner now let’s walk through each sub-domain of the subscription domain.

Each subdomain is responsible for finite set of activities/functions and these activities are triggered by either external stimulus (some operation done by subscriber or by merchant) or they are triggered by the life cycle events by the same or different sub domains.

Few Examples of event based processing are given here. A product is registered by the merchant by setting certain business rules associated with it. Then only it is available for subscription. An increase in the purchase price of a product will trigger recalculation of its offer price ( as per new purchase price). A Delivery made to a subscriber will register a revenue and profit appropriate to its basket value in business account. Registration of an excess profit on account of a product will register donating the excess profit into nodal account.

The reason for describing the sub domains using event based processing are

1. The boundaries of all sub domains can be marked precisely without any interference from other sub domain. Typically any lifecycle flow will complete only by series of activities happening across multiple sub domains. In case of their description in the event based approach each sub domain will process its part of the lifecycle flow and bounces an event thereby publishing the outcome. If the next activity is to be performed by a different sub domain then it will simply receive the published event and proceed on it. Thus sub domains will not inter mingle with each other and responsibilities of each domain can be precisely defined.
2. Event based processing can also be viewed as a software design. In case the business model need to be transformed into a software system no separate design will be needed to describe it.

## Product

Product business domain represents every product as a live entity which has its own characteristics and it is responsible for collaborating with other domains so as to serve number of responsibilities, to be served by every product in the business context.

### Types of Products

1. Price Committed Products
2. Percentage Discount Committed Products
3. None Committed Products.

### Product Level Metrics

#### Input Parameters

Following list provides input parameters of a product which are defined by merchant. They are prediction values based on merchant experience.

1. Its purchase price from the manufacturer/supplier(Cost of goods sold-COGS)
2. Its MRP( manufacturer suggested sale price)
3. Demand Density of the product
4. Expected number of new subscriptions each month: New subscriptions always get affiliated to the latest offered price of the product
5. Expected number of churned subscriptions each month: When churning of subscriptions happen, these subscriptions may have been associated with different prices at time of subscription, as they may have been subscribed at different times in a year.
   1. Churned subscriptions affiliated to price at start of the years
   2. Churned subscriptions affiliated to the changed sale price1
   3. Churned subscriptions affiliated to the changed price2 and so on.
6. Merchant’s expectation of profit for self (%)
7. From & To date of the forecast

Example input parameters table will look like this

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Parameter** | **Month1** | **Month2** | **Month3** | **Month4** | **Month5** | **Month6** | **Month7** | **Month8** | **Month9** | **Month10** | **Month11** | **Month12** |
| Purchase Price | 45 | 45 | 45 | 48 | 48 | 48 | 48 | 48 | 48 | 48 | 48 | 48 |
| MRP | 75 | 75 | 75 | 80 | 80 | 80 | 80 | 80 | 80 | 80 | 80 | 80 |
| Average Offered price | 65 | 66 | 66 | 66 | 66 | 66 | 66 | 66 | 66 | 66 | 66 | 66 |
| New subscriptions | 3000 | 2300 | 2400 | 2540 | 2600 | 3200 | 2800 | 3500 | 3200 | 3300 | 3100 | 2800 |
| Churned subscriptions | 300 | 200 | 120 | 160 | 150 | 210 | 160 | 140 | 120 | 100 | 130 | 170 |
| Merchant’s expected profit (%) | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 12 | 12 | 12 | 14 | 14 | 15 | 15 | 15 |

#### Calculated metrics

Based on these parameters following parameter values are calculated and stored against the product

1. Monthly operational expenses to be borne per product. This should be calculated based on per product operating expenses contribution calculated as given in next section.
2. Monthly sales and marketing expenses calculated per product based on monthly sales and marketing expenses forecasted by merchant (total expenses to be distributed across all the products..)
3. Breakeven price: The amount of money for which a product or service must be sold to cover the costs of manufacturing or providing it.

Breakeven price = Fixed cost for a product per unit + variable cost for a product per unit.

**Breakeven price = product’s purchase price + operating expenses per unit + sales expenses per unit**.

1. Offered price: If this price changes due to demand dynamics or due to change in purchase price, then the changed price should be marked from that month onwards. In forecasting it is not possible to predict how much and how many time an offered price undergoes changes. So forecast will assume single average offered price per month. In this case there are twelve (12) offered prices per year (one average offered price per month) to which subscriptions are affiliated. So All churning with respect to all 12 prices should be forecasted.
2. Net new subscriptions and Total subscriptions per month(to indicate demand)
3. % subscriptions churn per month(- #number of churned customers current month/total # customers at last month)
4. Monthly recurring revenue due to new subscriptions in a month( MRR New)
5. Monthly Churned MRR among subscriptions affiliated to offered price. and total churned MRR( approximate indication of impact of changed price on subscriptions churn),percentage net MRR churn( churned MRR/starting MRR)
6. Ratio of Its expected quantity demanded per month against total quantity demanded of all products in the same category( product and all its substitutes)
7. Monthly Average revenue per new subscriptions (ARPS (New) = New MRR/# New Customers \*1000) and Average revenue per total subscriptions (ARPS= Ending MRR/# total subscriptions\*1000).
8. Total monthly revenue
9. Total Cost of goods sold (COGS= Total subscriptions\* latest purchase price): Though subscriptions are committed the instantaneous sale price at the time of registration, they are periodically dispatched these products which are purchased at the latest purchase price (at the dispatch time). This is an important indicator of impact of change in product price on the revenue and margin.
10. Operating profit/loss(gross margin – operational expenses) and Operating profit/loss percentage( operating profit or Loss/COGS)
11. Subscription Lifetime Value(SLV): ARPS(New)\*Gross margin%/%MRR churn
12. Subscription lifetime period = 1/%customer churn
13. Cost of Acquiring a subscriptions (CAC=(sales& marketing expense/# new subscription) \*1000) : Isn’t giving discount per item included in cost of acquiring a customer?
14. SLV to CAC ratio: SLV/CAC. This indicates how much a subscription will yield by investing specific cost of acquiring a customer as a subscription. For a healthy product this ratio should be more than 4.It means if a merchant invests x rupees in acquiring a subscription, the subscription should at-least yield 4x rupees of business with the merchant.
15. Months to recover CAC= CAC/(ARPS(New)\*Gross Margin%) . This indicates how many months (minimum) an average subscription should be retained in order to at least recover cost of acquiring it.

### Lifecycle

Being a live business agent in the whole subscription ecosystem product has a defined lifecycle, which every product being sold through subscription adheres to.

1. Product gets registered with Subscription ecosystem in order to be identified as a “subscriptionable” product, product to which subscribers can choose to buy.
2. Registration is followed by configuration. Every product as a profit and revenue contributing agent may represent different behaviour, depending upon its nature and accordingly it should be configured. It configuration should dictate how and how much it can contribute in the subscription business.
3. Forecasting of a product is a prerequisite for determining its price for time to time. In absence of any history, forecasting starts with manual target setting based on experts judgements and experience. As the actual performance is getting captured, the forecasting will keep on periodically getting corrected so as to match the forecast with current trend.
4. Product pricing is an important recurring lifecycle activity which keeps tracking a product’s performance against its set targets and accordingly keeps recommending prices to be offered to new subscribers. Changing offer price of a product can sometimes be a rejuvenating lifecycle moment for that product as new price is based on its performance and balances out any trailing performance by offering lucrative price so as to boost its business.
5. A product periodically receives operating expenses attributed to itself, which are used in determining the breakeven price of the product. Every product may need different operating expenses depending upon any special needs associated with its storage, delivery etc.
6. A product daily checks with parent application registered purchase price, MRP and current stock of itself. These values are used to determine its offer price as well as used for calculating product performance metrics.
7. Register subscriptions for a product as well as subscription cancellations, is an on-going lifecycle activity which determines product life. A product is expected to keep track of new subscriptions to itself, and the offer price for which a subscription is registered. Similarly it also need to track in case of subscription cancellation, and the offer price at which the cancelled subscription was affiliated. The subscription trend to a product determines its price as well as shelf life. If product is continuously experiencing more cancellations that new subscriptions, as well as its losses cannot be recovered despite of multiple efforts of lucrative offering, it may not be suitable for subscription business and may be take out from subscription ecosystem.
8. A Product may occasionally contribute a part of its gains to Subscription ecosystem so that the same can be used to recover non-performing products. When to contribute and how much to contribute is automatically determined by the ecosystem based on product’s configuration.
9. A product periodically keeps calculating its performance metrics which tell the story of product’s overall performance and its contribution to overall subscription business. . It is also used to compare performance of competitor products (substitutes). The performance itself and its comparison provide hints to a merchant if any efforts are needed to boost business of some products.

Now let’s get deeper into characteristics of a product and its responsibilities/lifecycle activities.

## Product Attributes

In order to take care of this aspect of an intelligent product, each product will be associated with following attributes which will describe a product in from of its metadata.

1. Unique product identifier and name to distinguish it from other products
2. Category/sub category of product describing the product belonging to which family and if there is any sub category where they are further classified into. Products in the same category/sub category may be substitutes or complements of that product.
3. Weight of the product which will help in precisely identifying a specific product subtype among all variants of the same product/brand as well as it will be used to calculate the delivery charges required to deliver product.
4. Unit of measurement (ml, gram, kg etc.)
5. List of its substitutes and complements; as price changes in them are impacting pricing of the product
6. Demand density of the product. It defines the percentage share of a product in its category against all its substitutes/competition. Here assumption is made that total demand in market for given type of product is 100.If product A is sold 20 out of 100 then its demand density is 20(%).Demand density indicates a product’s market share against all its competitors. It should be periodically recalculated so as to see if the product is getting stronger or weaker against its competitors.
7. Average demand per year per subscriber: It provides average number of units of a product ordered per year per subscriber. This can be used to offer basket level discount per product (added to basket). If a subscriber orders above the average demand then he should be entitled for more basket level benefits and inverse if orders lesser than the average.
8. Product account. It maintains forecasts for the product which it is associated with as well as tracks the actual transactions happening with product including its price change. We will see it in detail in next section.

## Product Account

Product account is responsible to maintain financial attributes and metrics associated with a product. In all of the following scenarios appropriate attributes of product account should be updated.

Product Pricing Category: Product account maintains pricing category of the product. Every product can be categorized either as “Price Committed”, “Percent Discount Committed” or “None committed” depending upon, with which type of commitment it is being offered to subscribers. Also this category determines of price buckets are maintaining various committed price or various committed discount percentages or product will have a single price bucket because it is being categorized as “None Committed”.

Tagged Price Versions: The list maintains versions of purchase price and MRP changes that have associated active subscriptions. When purchase price (and MRP) of the product undergoes change, it should get added in Tagged Price Versions list which maintains versions of purchase prices against which active subscriptions are present. It should also enable recalculation of appropriate metrics listed in performance tracker.

Fixed Expense Versions and Variable Expense Versions: Main portal reports monthly stake of fixed and variable operating expense attributed to subscription business. It should add a new version of fixed/variable operating expenses versions list maintained by Product account.

Current Stock Of Units: Main portal also periodically informs current stock of a specific product against which subscriptions can be received. When the stock information arrives, it should be updated in “current Stock in Units” attribute.

When a new subscription is made to a product, it is expected to update appropriate attributes of product account such as

* The total count of items for the subscription period should get added to the latest price bucket.
* Current stock in units may get subtracted with total count of items subscribed???

Similarly when subscription to a product cancelled, the same should as well be updated at following places.

* It should update appropriate price bucket by adding count of remaining cancelled subscribed items, to the churned subscription count.
* It should add to the Current Stock in units by adding cunt of remaining cancelled subscriptions.

List of active price buckets: All price buckets having active subscriptions associated with them are called as active price buckets. These are maintained within a product account. We will get more description about them under Price Buckets section.

Product Performance Tracker : Performance of a product need to be periodically calculated in terms of basic metrics and tracked so as to understand if product is doing good/average/bad business. Moreover some of the performance metrics such as profit or revenue are tracked against forecasted performance figures to determine if offer price of the products needs to be changed. We will get more details about them in pricing section. The periodicity of calculating performance metrics should be determined by the merchant.

Credit points: As described in product collaboration model, product donates its excess profit (profit earned above set target) to an intermediary “nodal” account. When it does that it earns some credit points for each unit of money donated. These credit points indicate credibility of a product as well as help it get financial help in crisis situation or during execution of expansion plans

## Price Bucket

In instantaneous business offered price for a product remains active only until a new offer price replaces it. So any customer who is buying the same product at different times may likely pay different prices. But since his/her nature of association with merchant (for the purpose of buying a specific product) is instantaneous, he/she may agree to pay different price for same product for different association instances.

But subscription approach intends to have long term association with every subscriber. So charging different prices for all subscribed products despite of periodic buying agreement may ruin the trust of the subscriber. So subscription approach should try to provide some level of price assurance wherever possible to the subscribers, in order to make the commitments bidirectional.

Subscription business may commit an offered price to new subscribers so that they will keep receiving the product with same offered price. Or it may offer committed discount percentage, where subscriber will always gain a committed percentage discount on latest MRP.

This results into multiple offer prices being active for every product until each of them has at least one active subscriber. Price bucket represents these prices and number of subscribers associated with each of them.

## Price Bucket for Price Committed products

When a product is launched its first price bucket is created for it, having offered sale price of that product. When a subscriber subscribes to that product on the same day his/her id is registered with this price bucket.

Offered (sale) price of a product may keep changing due to dynamics of its demand OR due to change in the base (purchase and MRP) prices. For every changed offered price, a new price bucket will get created where the subscribers subscribing on/after the price change day are registered with this latest bucket.

Following are the attributes of a price bucket.

1. Offered price per unit
2. Start and end date of the offered price
3. Number of new subscriptions getting associated with this offered price
4. Number of subscriptions churned out from the offered price
5. Total number of subscriptions associated at any point of time
6. List of Items delivered ,date of delivery, revenue associated with each, profit associated with each

Example: Consider that On 1st January 2016 purchase price of product X is 45 Rs., MRP is 90 Rs..On the same day platform generated a new offered sale price is 72 Rs.. A subscriber has subscribed to two units of toothpaste per month (for one year) on the same day. In this case a new price bucket has been created on 1st Jan 2016, in which it has offered sale price as 72 Rs and the subscriber’s total subscription count(2 units per month \* 12 months=24 units) gets add to “Number of New Subscriptions” attribute of this bucket. Also the price bucket ID gets registered in his/her subscription definition (so as to remember which offer price has been committed to him/her).Thus all the subscribers, who have subscribed to this toothpaste on the same day/time, will get registered with the same price bucket. Also until new price bucket gets created, all subscriptions to this toothpaste will continue getting registered with the same price bucket.

After a few days if the offered price has been changed from 72 Rs. to 69 Rs. a new price bucket gets created. Now onwards any new subscriptions will get registered with this new bucket.

In case of price committed products, though purchase price of the product has changed, offered price for the subscribers who have subscribed to the earlier price cannot be changed. But the same will get changed for any new subscribers subscribing to the toothpaste newly on 23rd Feb 2016 or later by creating a new price bucket.

## Price Bucket for Percentage discount committed products

In case of percentage discount committed products too, price buckets get created in the same way as described in above category. But instead of offer price attribute they will have percentage discount attribute associated with them.

Periodically based on performance of a product or based on the base price changes new price buckets keep getting created (as in price committed category).But each price bucket ill offer a different percentage discount on latest MRP instead of offered price. Subscribers associated with each of these buckets will enjoy the offered discount prescribed in that price bucket.

In case base price (purchase price and MRP) of the product undergoes change, it gets reflected to all the price buckets. From that day subscribers will be charged new price with fixed (committed) percentage discount but applied on new MRP.

Following are the attributes of a price bucket.

1. Offered discount percentage
2. Start and end date of the offered price
3. Number of new subscriptions getting associated with this offered price
4. Number of subscriptions churned out from the offered price
5. Total number of subscriptions associated at any point of time
6. List of Items delivered ,date of delivery, revenue associated with each, profit associated with each

Example: Consider the same (toothpaste) example given for price committed price bucket. But now assume that instead of committed price the product is offering per cent discount commitment.

So on 1st January 2016 platform has created a new price bucket where 7% discount (on latest MRP) has been committed; gets created and 24 units (2 units per month subscribed by a subscriber for 12 months) get added to “new subscription count” of this price bucket. All subscribers subscribing to the toothpaste on and after 1st Jan 2016 will be committed 7% discount on latest MRP. It means if MRP changes the offer price they have to pay will also change but the discount percentage will remain constant.

When platform changes the discount percentage from 7% to say 6%( due to some demand fall), a new price bucket will get created. Any new subscriptions after this time will get associated with this price bucket.

## Price Buckets with ‘None’ commitment

There is no need to form multiple price buckets in case of products configured with ‘None’ commitment. A single price bucket will be created with latest offered price. All subscribers to that product are associated with same price bucket (regardless of when they have subscribed for the product). As and when offered price changes due to demand dynamics or due to base price changes, the same offered price will be applicable to all its subscribers. Structure of this price bucket is same as the one for price committed products. Only difference is, in this case a single price bucket is created per product.

1. Offered price per unit
2. Start and end date of the offered price
3. Number of new subscriptions getting associated with this offered price
4. Number of subscriptions churned out from the offered price
5. Total number of subscriptions associated at any point of time
6. List of Items delivered ,date of delivery, revenue associated with each, profit associated with each

Example: In a country which imports Lentil, the lentil prices are very volatile due to supply vs demand dynamics and uncertainty of international lentil price. Lentil prices keep changing so frequently that it is impossible for a merchant to offer them using either of “price committed” or “percent discount committed” approach. So merchant has configured lentil as a “None Committed” price category.

A single price bucket gets created for Lentil product item with latest offer price say 100 Rs per Kg. If a subscriber A has subscribed to 1 Kg lentil per month for 12 months, a subscription count of 12 units gets added to “New subscription Count” attribute of this price bucket.

Very soon offer price of Lentil has risen to 120 Rs per Kg. In this case subscriber A( and all subscribers subscribed for Lentil) will have to pay 120 Rs per Kg from now onwards.

As subscribers have chosen this item for subscription despite of its published pricing category being “None Committed”, they are prepared for volatility in its offer price and hence should be ready to pay the price differences, if any.

## Product Performance Tracker

Product performance tracker keeps track of periodic performance metrics of a product. Multiple instance of product performance tracker (one per period) indicate product business trend. The overall performance metrics of a product should be actively calculated when any transaction associated with that product is made. For example, when a new subscription is made for a product it quantity per period should be updated in the latest performance tracker. When a delivery of product should be made its revenue and profit figures should be calculated with latest performance tracker etc.

### Interactions

## Subscriber/Subscription

### Lifecycle

### Interactions

# Benefits

## Lifecycle

## Interactions

# Payments

## Modes of Payment

## Lifecycle

## Interactions

# Business Account

## Provision Types

## Lifecycle

## Interaction

# Business Activity Monitoring

# Processing Support