
Steps and Measures taken by Brands in identifying and reaching out to Customers with Special Needs that helps them in choosing, purchase and use of these Brands and Services with special reference to Kerala based Brands.

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Abstract

A brand is an identifying symbol, mark, logo, name, word, and/or sentence that companies use to distinguish their product from others. A brand evokes some responses in us by stimulating our senses. The Persons of Special Needs are those people who are specially abled and needs special care and attention. Customers with Special needs also called Persons of special needs have been categorised in this study. This research paper intends to find out measures taken by various Kerala based companies in identifying, attracting and reaching out to Persons of Special Needs that aids them in their choosing, purchase and use of these company's brands and services. This study through in-depth interview and questionnaire also tries to understand if Companies have considered persons of Special needs as part of their customer segments and the features added in their product and services to aid these Persons of Special needs. Recommendations and further research areas have also been added in the study.

Keywords:

Brands;
Persons of Special needs;
Customers;
Kerala Based brands;
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1. Introduction

A. Brands

Brand is a unique identity that is associated with the product which enables consumers to differentiate one product from another. The American Marketing Association defines brand as a 'name, term, sign, symbol, or combination of them that is designed to identify the goods or services of one seller or group of sellers and differentiate them from competitors.' Brand personality refers to the personification of any brand. It is basically a set of human characteristics or traits that are assigned or embedded within a brand. Brand personality is created when there are human-like traits such as caring, creative, trustworthy, unique, straightforward, rebel, dishonest, etc. are a part of the brand characteristics. Brand personality is the way in which a brand behaves or communicates with its users. Human-like characteristics signify the brand behaviour through the individuals who are representing the brand (e.g. employees) along with packaging, advertising, etc. When brand identity or brand image is expressed in the form of human-like characteristics, it is referred to as brand personality.

B. Brands in Kerala

Kerala has always been known as the God's own city. While the state has been famous for its scenic beauty and cultural heritage, there are many popular brands that have emerged from the place. The well-known brands in Kerala are spread over a large number of industries. Some of the well-known brands in Jewellery, FMCG, Retail, Hospitality and Healthcare have been dominant over the last many years.

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C. *Persons of Special Needs*

Customers/ Persons of Special needs are those persons of various difficulties (such as a physical, emotional, behavioural or learning disability or impairment) that causes an individual to require additional or specialised services or accommodations (such as in education, recreation, shopping or other daily activities). The World Health Organization's definition of a disability is "any restriction or lack (resulting from an impairment) of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being" (WHO 1980, p. 143). The disability or handicap may result in a state of either total or partial dependency.

Some of the descriptors of Disabilities of Persons of Special Needs are: Persons of Special needs means people having symptoms related to (but not restricted to):

- Physical: Multiple sclerosis, allergies, asthma, juvenile arthritis, leukemia, muscular dystrophy, epilepsy, handicap (Full/ partial), Heart ailments
- Developmental: Down syndrome, autism, dyslexia, dyspraxia
- Behavioural/emotional: obsessive compulsive disorder, dissociation, Stress disorder, anxiety, depression, bipolar
- Sensory: impaired: Visually impaired, Deaf, Mute
- Others: Very elderly person, Pregnant woman, People of different culture/language other than the local region

All these descriptors of the Special need person affect at least to a certain extent, the consumption behaviour of those persons. Data from various countries show that between 10 to 15% of the population suffer from some type of activity limitation resulting from a chronic condition. The proportion of disabled people increases significantly in the stratum of persons of 45 years old and more - which, given the current phenomenon of the aging of the population in the occidental world, allows the anticipation of some major social changes in the upcoming years. The population of disabled people in the world is about 15 per cent of the world population, that is, over one billion. Disability is a broader term and encompasses people with limited mobility, activity limitation or hearing and vision impairment. As per Census 2011, nearly 2.68 crore people in India are disabled. Nothing has dampened the indomitable spirit of people with disabilities as much as their inaccessibility to proper infrastructure. Lack of adequate disabled-friendly facilities has acted as bigger roadblock than their condition itself and prevented them from making valuable contributions to the society.

In Kerala, a state wide survey of Persons with Disabilities (PwDs), was undertaken by the Kerala Social Security Mission in 2015, the first of its kind in India, covering 22 types of disabilities. The survey was focussed on persons of physical disability which constitute a part of Persons of Special needs. As per the survey, 7.94 lakh people equivalent to 2.32 percent of the total population of the State are disabled, of whom, females constitute 44.57 percent, SC 10.93 percent and ST 2.15 percent. The highest number of disabled persons is in Malappuram district (12.5 per cent) followed by Thiruvananthapuram (9.72 per cent) and the lowest in Wayanad district (2.91 per cent). Regarding type of disabilities, locomotor disability stands top with 32.89 percent and multiple disabilities stand second 17.31 percent. PwDs often lack access to good quality basic and higher education, shopping avenues, and even the inability to walk and move freely.

D. *How brands of today serve Persons of Special Needs*

When we design something that can be used by those with disabilities, we often make it better for everyone" – Donald Norman. Some of the initiatives taken by well-known Brands across the world and in India in reaching out to the Persons of Special needs and making them part of their customer group is discussed in this section briefly:

- Microsoft's Xbox Adaptive Controller is targeted at users with a range of physical disabilities. Tailor-made controllers for disabled people are near non-existent in the gaming world. Several charities have been set up to address this, creating modified controllers that are more accessible to disabled users. In the promo launched for Xbox, the kids talk about how being able to play video games with their friends on an equal playing field enriches their lives. (Ref:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KfnmCUFxZwA>). Microsoft's Disability Answer Desk is where customers with disabilities get support with Microsoft Office, Windows, and Xbox Accessibility. This includes product issues, accessibility questions, and use of assistive technology.

- International toy retailer Toys R Us offers a shopping experience that focuses on helping children with cerebral palsy, autism, and other special needs feel comfortable while shopping. The store has dimmed light without distracting announcements or music. Additionally, the store offers an area for children to colour with store employees while parents' shop. The store mascot, Geoffrey the Giraffe, serves orange juice, milk, and donuts, and will also take photos with the kids.
- Delhi Metro is a pioneering project that has adhered to the needs of differently-abled persons by providing ramps at all stations, low-level control panel in the lifts, buttons in braille, prominent colour contrasts and lettering, etc.
- Shanghumukham Beach in Kerala was also recently made disabled-friendly when the state tourism department declared a policy aimed at providing suitable facilities like ramps, railings, lower height food counters, etc.
- Prime Minister Narendra Modi had recently declared to make all new government infrastructure in the country disabled friendly.
- Government has launched the Accessible India Campaign (Sugamya Bharat Abhiyan) to raise awareness on accessibility. The program focuses on making at least 50 per cent of all government buildings in national and state capitals 'fully accessible' for the disabled
- Trivandrum Central Railway Station recently became the first railway station in India to become disabled-friendly and plans are underway to extend the facilities to other stations as well.

The Persons with Disabilities Act, 1995 and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, both are intended towards securing the rights of persons with disability and providing them equal access. The United Nations have designed a manual for planning and designing the infrastructure for aiding the movement and accessibility for Disabled (refer Accessibility for the Disabled-<https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/enable/designm/AD1-02.htm>)

The physically disabled and specially challenged persons have received very little if any attention at all so far. But within the last few years brands around the world have been giving special attention and significance to the special needs of its consumers/potential customers. This research paper is an attempt to study the steps and actions taken by Kerala based brands to meet the demands and needs of Persons of Special needs, how the brands have recognised these people and the product features and service aspects they have included to meet the special needs of this group. The preliminary analysis of data was collected through in-depth and group interviews with the top management of various well-known Brand product and service providers in Kerala. A questionnaire was also designed and used for this purpose. The detailed research objectives are mentioned in the section III A. It is proposed that marketers, public policy makers and consumer behaviour researchers can all benefit from further research on the special needs and the peculiarities of these special needs consumers.

The people with special needs have been fighting for equal access to shopping, schools, jobs, and the marketplace for a long time. It is responsibility of each Brand to pay attention to the peculiarities of the consumption situation of these persons in order to support their needs. Most of the Persons of Special needs fear or are emotionally disturbed when they have to go for shopping alone or even with others as they think what others might think of them, what others speak of them.

This research paper tries to address some issues pertaining to the ability of Persons of special needs in choosing their brands for eg: Seeing is a very important part of the act of consuming (dress, art objects, etc.). What does consumption "mean" for visually-impaired individuals? Can we think of materialism in the context of blindness, since the possession of objects seems to be so much intertwined with the ability to look at them and enjoy their presence? How do company and brand images form in the mind of blind consumers?

2. Research Method

The data collected from both primary and secondary sources of information. The primary data for the study were collected through Questionnaire Method and Interview Method. Secondary data materials were collected from the scientific articles from online libraries and journals, articles, research theses and dissertations etc provided secondary information for the study. The sample size used in this survey was based on simple random sampling method where a sample size of 52 were selected. This sample size of 52

represented some of the well known brands offering product and service spread across various industries which are made and manufactured in the State of Kerala.

The research methodology used for this study were

- In depth interview: A detailed structured interview was conducted with the top management of the companies
- Structured questionnaire: a questionnaire was used and sent to top management members

The same questions were asked in both interview and questionnaire. The questionnaire and interview start with a presentation of the objectives of the interview, followed by some general questions about the company and the brands offered as products/services. Then the questions relating to persons of special needs were asked such as the percentage of persons of special needs customers, the special features included in their product/service and infrastructure so as to aid in their purchase.

Research objectives

The present paper intends to learn about the contribution made by Kerala brands in reaching out to the Persons of Special needs. Some of the research objectives are:

- To find out the level of understanding by Kerala based companies regarding ‘Customers of Special needs/persons of Special Needs’
- To find out the special features (if any) included in the Product/service by the Brands that facilitate in its choosing and purchasing by Persons of Special needs
- To find out the special features included in the infrastructure of Kerala based organisation’s office/retail that aid the Persons of Special needs in their mobility and selection.
- To understand the Special Customer Services (if any) provided by the Brands to Persons of Special needs
- To understand if Brands have taken a feedback from Customers of Special Needs and the analysis done based on these feedbacks.

3. Results and Analysis

The following were some of the analysis from questionnaire and interview

1. *Understanding Persons of Special needs:* Almost 85% of the respondents have mentioned that they have understood what is meant by Persons of Special needs and almost 55% out of that have responded that visually/speech impaired and physical handicap constitute Persons of Special needs. Other difficulties relating to Developmental, Emotional/behavioural and Others such as even very old people, pregnant women were not mentioned by the respondents as belonging to the category of Persons of Special needs.
2. *Number of Persons of Special Needs customers:* None of the respondents were able to respond on the total number of regular customers who were Persons of Special needs. They had only mentioned that ‘few’ of their customers were visually or hearing impaired
3. *Attributes in Brand/Service:* There were no specific attributes or features in the Brands/services that were specifically designed for Persons of Special needs. One responded that the Brand name were written in bright, big and bold figures so that it can be easily read and seen by all.
4. *Infrastructure:* 52% of the respondents mentioned that they had accessible interiors that make the customers feel warm, quiet and courteous. Barrier free premises means wide open spaces where one can move around without hitting or damaging oneself. Most of the respondents had ramps constructed (89%). 5% had specially designed restrooms for physically handicapped while just 1 respondent had a mother and child room built in the premises. Wheel chair was provided by one respondent while none of the respondents provided any GPS driven equipment/tool for easy access through the premises. Majority of the respondents though did not have a separate Medical room, they had First aid boxes
5. *Customer service:* No special training was provided to the customer service staff in relation with handling the needs of Person of special needs customers. But all staff was briefed on how to politely handle such customers
6. *Accessibility and Movement:* There is no particular signage or boards that aid Persons of Special needs movement
7. *Information and Communication:* No information or communication is imparted through Audio or visual media that helps Persons of Special needs to understand, choose and purchase brands of their choice or select the services that they like
8. *Training:* The staffs are not specially trained in handling the Persons of Special needs. Eg: Staffs who can understand or communicate using sign languages were not present.
9. *Specific Marketing and promotions:* Marketing and Promotions specifically were not designed to attract or induce Persons of Special needs

10. *Feedback*: No Special feedbacks were taken from Person of Special needs while almost 82% of the respondents mentioned that they have a feedback system and a proper analysis were done on the feedbacks received.

11. *Social Support Activities*: Almost 90% of the respondents have contributed towards various Social Support activities either by financially supporting the free medical camps or through donations and other contributions that support Persons of Special needs.

Some of the points for discussion here are:

- Most of the companies have not tried to understand the full definition of Persons of Special needs and neither have they tried to find out the special needs of these segments. Most of the company's top management and customer service staff thinks that Persons of special needs means visual or hearing impaired or both. They haven't recognised the fact that there are more categories towards Persons of Special needs and that a pregnant lady or an elderly person also constitutes the same.
- Most of the companies 'feel' that visual impairment is one of the most important form of Special needs, but the companies have not included any special features in the product or offered any special service to the visual impaired customers who might visit the organisation or their stores.
- The companies have not recognised that the consumer decision process in relation to a Person of Special Needs will be different from that of another consumer and that there are many other factors that need to be considered by these people to complete their purchase.
- Most of the brands have not included any features in their product or service that facilitate the purchasing process of Persons of Special needs. The need for including any distinguishing features on their brands or providing additional customer service have not been thought of by the companies. But ramps have been constructed and in some retail outlets separate washrooms for disabled have been established.
- Marketing activities or Promotions to include the Persons of special needs have not been conducted. But the companies feel that the marketing activities should be carried out in the manner in which the Persons of Special needs should not feel that they are being treated as separate from the regular customers.
- Most of the company have not taken a feedback from the customers who are Persons of Special needs. Therefore, presently there is no proper system of analysing their feedbacks or a mechanism to know their consumption pattern, likes or dislikes.
- The staff have not been provided with special training regarding how to handle and help Persons of Special needs.
- Most of the Company's top management that they are involved in many Social support activities to uplift the Persons of Special needs as part of their Corporate Social Responsibility.
- The post-purchase processes of collecting feedback and information regarding new brands or services included are not imparted to the customers.

4. Conclusion

This research paper has been an initial attempt to study on how Kerala based companies have understood the meaning of Persons of Special needs and has undertaken a research to understand the measures and steps taken by these companies to reach out to these Persons of Special needs. The companies have not included any features in their brands/ services that makes the shopping experience for Persons of Special needs easy and convenient. This paper has also included certain recommendations that will help Companies to include Persons of Special needs as part of their customer segments and in return these special customer segments will be able to choose and shop like any other customer. In the last sections scope for further research in this field has also been mentioned.

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