

THE SMART CEO

Inspiring India

*An author
in every
CEO*

In this edition, we profile the stories of six CEO-authors, with the goal of inspiring many more leaders to write.



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– Rama Bijapurkar

BY POORNIMA KAVLEKAR

Rama Bijapurkar needs no introduction. Any marketing professional, with a keen interest on consumer

behavior will definitely know about her work and books. The author of the well-known books on consumer India, Bijapurkar has chronicled her experiences in her three books. Her first book, “We are like that only” was published in 2007, in which she helps readers understand the logic of consumer India, why they will not change in a hurry and what it takes to build a winning business in such a market.

Her second book, “Customer in the boardroom”, published in 2012, is

about crafting customer-based business strategies. She highlights the need for companies to make customer centricity a central factor when formulating their business strategy development process.

Her more recent work, “A never before world” which is about tracking the evolution of consumer India, analyses the consumer economy’s demand and supply environment, income demographics, social and cultural changes and so on. She has also highlighted the opportunities, the unserved needs, the incorrect assumptions, the future and the strategy required to ride this next big wave of opportunity. In this interview, Bijapurkar talks to us about the nitty-gritties of being an author and shares a few insights on customer centricity and customer dissatisfaction.



How do you arrive at the title of your book? Is there a specific approach you follow?

I have a working title and then, after it is all done, I sit back and try to figure out what is the essence of what I want to convey. I list alternative titles and iterate it with friends and publishers and we choose based on what's good for sales and cover graphics.

You've been on the boards

of several leading Indian companies and consulted with many of them.

1. Sometimes, as an author, you're not able to share the full picture of what happened; But you'd still like to share a bit of what happened with your readers. How do you deal with such situations while writing a book?

QUICK BYTES

Who or what inspired you to write?

I am a management consultant. My business is about making others put their money where my mouth is. Writing is one way of doing that.

How do you deal with a writer's block?

Stop writing. Think about it. It means you are bored, or not convinced about what you are saying, or have a logic flaw. Understand it [let it incubate, ask others, obsess a bit] and the answer will come to unblock.

What takes longer? Research/introspecting or writing?

Deciding what your argument is – crystallizing what you want to say takes the longest. If that is done, writing flows easily.

A fun anecdote while you wrote the book?

My daughter asked me "are you having fun writing the book?". I said no, I'm bored and stressed with it. She said "then imagine how much fun your readers will have reading it". I threw my manuscript away and started again.

What would you do differently in your next book?

Pick up energy and promote it better. Try a different layout or format. Do quick takes at the beginning of each chapter.

What did you realize about yourself, that you didn't know before writing the book?

That you think you have the whole argument and the logic is obvious [as seen from power point slides]. But when you write, there are gaping holes. So I have been winging it more than I thought I did.

You have to be clear about both the concept and the context – you can share the former fully, the latter a bit. Disguising it smartly to protect identity is necessary and takes some work. You have to explore the ethics of the situation too.

2. How do you strike a balance between sharing your own experience vs. sharing your observation of others' experiences

You don't strike a balance. You do both; whatever is appropriate in whichever situation. Sometimes you are the actor and sometimes the drama critic.

What are some metrics you track after your book is launched? How do you track them?

I track impact – who is reading it, has it got onto best seller lists, has it been favorably reviewed, what are the main messages people are taking away from it, how far and wide am I getting fan mail from, how is it doing in the social media space and so on. I also track opinion leader engagement with the book very carefully. I don't track sales at all.

A word of advice to other professionals who'd like to write a book?

Don't procrastinate. Don't agonise. Just start writing.

How have you evolved as an author, through your various books? Any changes you've observed in yourself as a writer?

I try to resist the temptation to copy a successful template. Each of my books is different in tone and content. It's safer to stick to a winning formula but I don't write for the sales graphs, I write to seek to influence. But writing a book after the Internet content in India has multiplied has been very hard. You don't know whether any of your ideas are original or not!

According to you, which are some brands that have really understood their consumers very well? What did they do right?

It's been different brands at different times. Understanding customers for product development is one type of understanding and doing so for shaping business direction is yet another. Understanding consumer buying patterns to enable your own inventory and supply chain decisions is yet another kind of understanding. LG and Samsung have done a brilliant job of product development for the Indian consumer. Fab India has done a great job of business design and brand positioning. They have found the sweet spot that connects across diverse customer types and is truly a mass affluent brand that has emotional and functional value to customers. I would say Titan/Tanishq has done it too. Big Bazaar does it too and far better. What these brands do right is understand that the heart of success is sacrifice and long-term views. Flipkart is Crawford market on the Internet; you name it we have it, but what does the brand stand for? Brands that are customer centric are obsessed about who buys, not just what is selling.

How does a company stay customer-centric over the long-term? For example, Dell

computers was highly customer centric in the early 2000s, but as the digital world evolved, they lost the plot. According to you, what should a leader do to ensure this doesn't happen?

Actually it's not about being customer-centric. It's about making sure (in a ruthlessly honest way) that you still have customer perceived value advantage over others. Your (benefit minus cost) bundle has to be better than others'. Value arrogance or value myopia is why companies lose the plot.

How should leaders react to customer dissatisfaction? After Flipkart faltered on the big billion day, a candid mail from the founders to all consumers was noted as a good gesture. Is transparency and humbleness gaining more importance in the world of marketing?

Leaders should acknowledge and fix dissatisfaction. Mere apologies without fixing doesn't help. But fixing well and not apologizing can work. Doing both calms the emotions and helps the rational equations that companies and brands have with customers. As customer power grows, and customers can rubbish companies in groups that grow and influence others, arrogance is a big risk for businesses to take.

What next for Rama, the author?

Let's see. If my work throws up interesting things I will write about them. If not, I will just read!

About the author:

A thought leader in market strategy and India's consumer economy, Rama Bijapurkar has an independent marketing consulting practice and works across sectors and organizations. Apart from her consulting practice, she has served as an independent director on the boards of many blue chip companies like Axis Bank, Bharat Petroleum, CRISIL, Godrej Consumer Products, Infosys and so on. She also serves on the Governing Councils of the Banking Codes and Standards Board of India, the Insurance Information Board and is a member of the Eminent Persons Advisory Group of the Competition Commission of India. A regular visiting faculty of her alma mater, IIM (A), Bijapurkar is also a member of its board of governors.