

Destination Mumbai: Getting Close to Clients

In these days of micromarketing, when every petrol pump and grocery scanner seem to know the most intimate details of your life, could a low-tech company have invaluable lessons to teach about service excellence? What might a bunch of Westerners learn at the feet of an uneducated workforce in a developing economy?

Conventional Wisdom Aside

A leading financial services firm dared its global leaders to ask such questions, taking them on an “expedition” to destinations with importance to the firm’s strategy. The company knew it had to improve its level of client intimacy if it was to become the trusted advisor across a broad range of services. While technology could clearly play a role—and Western banks have certainly invested heavily in technology—only a unique learning experience could enable these leaders to fathom the

full interplay of customer connections. This group needed much more than a field trip: in order to learn, they needed to set aside what they thought they already knew.



Explains Duke CE executive director Bob Reinheimer, who helped design and orchestrate the resulting program, “Sometimes, to be really engaging, you’ve got to do something really risky. We decided that the best way we could provide the insight the client sought was to go to a part of the world that was truly being transformed by technology, so that they could see what that transformation looked like and also encounter a developing nation and a developing culture that might represent a very attractive future market.”

And so it was that a dozen Western bankers trekked to Mumbai—the former colonial metropolis of Bombay, now a city of more than 16 million—to be schooled by the Nutan Mumbai Tiffin Box Suppliers Association.

This network of some 5,000 carriers delivers hot lunches (tiffin is a British word for lunch) to nearly 200,000 people every working day, returning the tiffin boxes to suburban spouses before the evening rush hour. It’s a labor-intensive business with an astonishing history and an error rate of one in six million transactions. Computers should be so smart.

The week in India, itself just one leg of the expedition, included interactive classroom sessions led by faculty and experts with rich local insight—but it was getting out of the classroom that gave participants a fresh lens on customer service. In a world depersonalized by technology, the tiffin carriers—better known by their Hindi appellation of Dabbawallas—were participants’ most memorable encounter by far.

Improving on a Legacy

It all began with British officers stationed at outposts throughout Bombay, who craved good, fresh food for their lunches. With the help of local men, they created an organization whose runners picked up lunches, delivered them to the outpost, and returned the tiffin boxes back to the kitchen for use the next day.

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The business thrived, and when the British left India, the Tiffin Box Association simply decided to continue the service they had been providing for decades, turning now to the middle- and upper-level managers of India's rising professional class, who were dispersed throughout office buildings in downtown Mumbai.

The tiffin suppliers have been operating for more than 100 years, and are world-renowned for their customer service and network management skills. Their Six-Sigma business is a perfect exemplar of intimacy without the use of technology. Using many lunch carriers across many pick-up, exchange and delivery points, the Dabbawallas pride themselves on their customer knowledge and unbelievable accuracy.

A Sense of Vocation

Duke CE project director Shannon Galphin managed the program, handling the tangled logistics of delivering this experience amid the congestion and seeming chaos of an Asian metropolis. Galphin has delivered programs in Stockholm, Hong Kong and parts of Germany as well as across the U.S. Fascinated by the rich mix of Indian cultures, she's ready to return: "The people in Mumbai are just so proud of their heritage, and so proud of their culture, that they want to share it with you.

"None of the Dabbawallas speak English," Galphin continues. "Very, very few of them can even read and write, but they view their job as almost a religion."

They have reason to be proud.

How It Works

Beginning his rounds at about 10:00 a.m. in one of the outlying Mumbai neighborhoods, each Dabbawalla collects tiffin boxes with freshly packed lunches from the homes where these managers live, usually from a spouse. (Virtually all the suppliers and their customers are men.) They load the dabbas, or boxes, onto large wooden racks that they carry on their heads, boarding public trains for the journey into Church Street Station in central Mumbai.

"It seemed to me that for this group of financial services executives to really understand India, they couldn't just encounter the country from behind a sheet of plate glass," says Reinheimer. So the visitors benefited from—and perhaps were humbled by—a rare opportunity to meet and follow the Dabbawallas.

"We needed to not get so enamored of the technology story that we would lose track of the other things so important to exemplary customer service—a central part of what we were asked to investigate," adds Reinheimer. "Diligence, loyalty, tradition, hard work, relationships, face to face interaction, dependability of service—all were critical."

Participants were assigned to one of six different Dabbawallas, shadowing them on their distribution routes, witnessing the mass exchange of lunches, and tracking their mentors through thronged streets to see how they divided and exchanged boxes and carried them onto the trains.

Not your typical day on Wall Street or in The City. The Tiffin Box Association provided a way to give program participants much more than an interesting cultural encounter: they found an unforgettable opportunity to see fundamental business virtues in action.

Galphin described the unique scene at Mumbai's Church Street Station, where tiffin boxes are sorted and routed to their destination: "You'll see all the Dabbawallas pouring out of trains, walking from different areas, all wearing little white Gandhi caps and carrying 25 or 30 of these tiffins on their heads, shoulders, in bags, in all different ways."

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Afterwards, participants returned to the classroom to talk about what they had learned and seen. The debrief of such an experience, according to Reinheimer, is the most important part of a custom design because it solidifies the connection to their business issues.

Learning from the Best

“The testimony from the participants,” Reinheimer reports, “was that it was a fascinating cultural encounter and a very interesting glimpse into how a very different kind of business can be brought to life in a setting like this.

“I think that they were reminded of some of the traditional virtues that go behind building a business that has exemplary customer service.”

At the end of the program, participants cited their half-day with the Dabbawallas as a high point of their experience. They were struck by the existence of a world-class organization without technology in a land where nearly half the citizens are illiterate. They remembered the relentless heat, witnessed customer intimacy in its purest form, and were stunned by the impressive accomplishments of the Tiffin Box Association. The bankers experienced—in real time—a radical analogy for their industry, based on a service model that any global company might envy.

The learning was wholly human, wholly unique, and remarkably effective.