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Bazaar Truths

Weekend Rush Blues

The 'burbs go shopping on weekends and malls must learn to handle the crowds, find Namrata Singh and Aradhana Takhtani

Five-year-old Shefali knows that Saturday mornings are reserved for the regular weekly jaunt to the nearby mall in suburban Mumbai. She is usually ready with her list of things she wants her office-going parents to buy. Along with the regular grocery for the home, the Sharmas also pick up chocolate and ready-to-eat snacks for their little one and top it with a relaxed lunch at the food court located inside the mall.

The Sharmas are among several thousand Indian families who are increasingly thronging malls and supermarkets over the weekend. It's a reality that retailers are already grappling with. A long line of cars and queues at the check-out counters are now a regular occurrence over the weekend at most malls, supermarkets and department stores. Not surprisingly, weekends form 40-50% of the week's sales for a big retail store or hypermarket. At Inorbit Mall, one of the biggest malls in suburban Mumbai, 60% of the week's business is done over the weekend. "On an average, we get nearly 50,000 footfalls on the weekend as against 22,000 during weekdays," says Anupam T, unit head of Inorbit, Malad. It's the same story at most Food Bazaar outlets, says Damodar Mall, president, foods, Pantaloon. "Our sales over the weekend tends to be double that of any other week day."

Clearly, weekend shopping is a trend whose time has come. In the metros, hectic work lives, dual income nuclear families and lack of quality time has ensured that most working couples have no time for shopping other than over the weekend. "For many, it is a way to unwind and also spend quality time with the family. Much of the shopping is done jointly because this is the only day that the husband is free and able to drive the family around," says Mall. Devangshu Dutta, chief executive, Third Eyesight, a Delhi-based consulting firm in the retail sector, says weekend shopping in organised retail will grow as consumers want to be in the thick of things.

Much of this is borne out by the research on shopping behaviour done by KSA Technopak, a leading consultancy. The increase in the number of women in the workforce is directly influencing the weekend shopping trend. Says Arvind Singhal, chairman, KSA Technopak, these women are creating a new category of Double Job Nuclear Households, for whom the only time available for shopping is the weekend. Secondly, these families are combining shopping with leisure. Again, weekend options, especially where malls have come up, include multiplexes and food courts, rather than pure shopping.

However, for retailers, this skew is beginning to raise serious infrastructure constraints. Unlike the West, where the concept of weekend shopping first evolved, in India it is somewhat different. There, large stores and malls, as a rule, are generally located on the edge of town. Distances are relatively greater and consumers tend to stockpile goods for a fortnight or even for a month. On the other hand, malls in India tend to be located in the heart of town and often, without any planning for peak traffic, says Dutta. The worry is that the resultant crowds will put off the serious shopper. And so most large-format retail outlets are beginning to grapple with the phenomenon. At Food Bazaar, store managers have begun experimenting with incentive programmes that induce non-peak-hour shopping. For instance, shoppers are offered a bagful of vegetables free, if they shop before 6 pm on a weekday.

Even a 50-year-old retail store, Premsons, has now recognised the weekday phenomenon. Located at Breach Candy in Mumbai, Premsons has had a single outlet for decades. Six months ago, the family decided to remain open on Sundays too—a break from the tradition. No doubt, the footfalls increased rapidly. "Shopping is becoming more of a family affair. Men, in particular, are more relaxed on a weekend as they are away from work, and can spend more time browsing. This only enhances sales," says Premsons' owner Bharat Gala.

But the moot point is whether it makes sense for retailers to reverse the trend. According to Samsika

Marketing Consultants CMD Jagdeep Kapoor, some retailers may try promotional programmes for weekdays so as to get more crowd in on these lull days. "But it is not logical to level out things. Instead of making 20 into 30 on weekdays, it is better to make 100 into 300 on weekends. In fact, retailers should further enhance sales on weekends by operating 24 hours on weekends," he adds. Food Bazaar's Mall says their focus instead has been to beef up service levels by cutting down any promo activity during peak hours, and keep many more checkout counters open.

However, in their older stores, consumers living close to the store have become smarter: they have begun to beat the crowds by choosing non-peak hours to complete their shopping. But Third Eyesight's Dutta says Indian retailers need to do more. Instead of blindly copying western formats, they need to think of novel ways to ease congested aisles and improve the shopping experience. Like the shopping trolley for instance. "It is a Western concept tailored for people who buy in huge bulk at one go, typically for a fortnight. Indians tend to buy for three-four days. Why do we need such huge trolleys that leave no space to even walk during the weekends?," asks Dutta. Bangalore's Central Mall has begun to make some headway: it has a netlike basket with wheels that can be shortened and extended based on the needs of the shopper. TNN

