

For Sanjoy Mukerji, director, business operations, north and east India, Vodafone Essar, customer trust and consistent service quality are of utmost importance... {K2Splitter}

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When Sanjoy Mukerji talks about why he finds the telecom industry fascinating, his enthusiasm is infectious. He talks about the social changes he sees in India during his travels, relates little vignettes that show how small-town India's aspirations have grown, and expresses excitement at the potential of mobile phones to liven up villagers' lives by offering them much-needed entertainment.

Mukerji says telecom is unique in that few other industries, even FMCG companies, have as much simultaneous contact with the customer as the various departments of a telecom company.

"Right from the network, which customers evaluate when they look at the bars on the phone and which they experience when they make a call, they immediately judge the network by the quality of their call. The network communicates directly with the customer when the latter calls to ask why two rupees have been deducted from the balance. The information technology department directly impacts a customer's opinion of the brand. The sales and marketing team interacts on what plan a customer should opt for. The collections team also has direct contact. So you have about six different departments simultaneously interacting with the customer," says Mukerji.

One of Vodafone's strengths, he says, is that each department speaks the same language. "Because airtime is an intangible product, trust is very important, and that's why every department at Vodafone has the same stance towards the customer and consistency in every communication," he says. "Creating coordination and collaboration at every level of operation so that customers get a consistent brand experience is one of the most satisfying parts of the job and where Vodafone excels."

I am talking to Mukerji at the Vodafone office in Okhla, south Delhi. The road to the office is

bone-breaking. While researching him before the interview, I had read that Mukerji had suffered four slipped discs. As I jolted and bumped my way to the office to meet him, I thought it must have been the potholes that did his back in! After all, to suffer one slipped disc could be regarded as a misfortune, to suffer two seems like carelessness, but four...?

The explanations Mukerji gives, as we sit in his large, airy office, are quite different. They range from extensive travelling to twisting his back while getting out from a bottling machine at the PepsiCo factory in Cuttack (which he had unwisely entered to repair), to an awkward move while doing weights.

“Yoga has stabilised my back, touch wood,” he says. “I tried everything – acupuncture, acupressure, homoeopathy, allopathy, reflexology – but none of it worked. Now it’s fine and doesn’t limit me at all.”

That is just as well because he still travels a lot. Since his wife Orpita and 16-year-old daughter Sanjita are currently based in Mumbai, he makes a weekly trip to the city from Delhi, and since he is responsible for the management and business in 13 circles in the north and east, the job entails extensive travelling.

He has dealt with numerous challenges in his almost 10 years at Vodafone. Jammu & Kashmir has presented operational problems owing to security requirements. Vodafone had to abide by stringent subscriber verification rules and often had to verify subscribers all over again. At times, prepaid services were stopped altogether and then restarted.

In Bihar, crime is an issue. Diesel used for generators at cell sites is often stolen. “We have thousands of sites across a circle and each one is like a mini factory. Criminals steal diesel, they steal copper cable worth Rs 1 lakh,” Mukerji says. “Maoists occasionally burn down a site.”

Recruiting people is another challenge as the business becomes larger and more complex. He has recruited people from remote areas and realises that they need to be supported as much as those in Delhi or Chandigarh. “We have to make sure they feel involved and part of the mainstream,” he says.

Right now, what's creating a buzz is Vodafone's much-awaited 3G launch. "The reaction to 3G has been enthusiastic," he says. "It has seen a huge surge in data usage as people use the internet on their mobiles to download content."

While rural subscribers are still using their phones almost exclusively for voice and to some extent for SMS, in urban India, he says they are being used for data, tracking locations, connectivity, watching TV, etc. As these concepts penetrate rural India and rural coverage improves, Mukerji sees fantastic growth happening as rural customers start demanding what urban customers enjoy access to – songs, video clips and TV.

"A lot of entertainment will move to phones. A lot of first-time internet usage will be on the phone as people access live TV and YouTube. Rural customers have the cash and are willing to pay. Later, you'll start seeing SIM cards being used in fridges and cars to remind you when a service is due and in all sorts of other machinery too," he says.

As an example of how people want entertainment, he talks of a visit to a small cluster of villages in Orissa where he found five shops with computers. Each one had an internet connection and was downloading music from the net and transferring it to a phone.

Mukerji was with PepsiCo for 11 years and worked all over India. He joined when he was 25. "It was like being at business school for me. I learnt all about business operations. I was one of the first employees and because we didn't even have a licence then, we got no salary for six months. But it was hugely exciting to be part of the initial team. It felt good to help build the organisation and the brand in India."

At PepsiCo, he also saw how managers motivated and energised their teams into putting in performance that far exceeded their salary levels. For Mukerji, motivating people is all about making them realise their potential, which many people fail to do.

"Some people just don't see their own potential. Others are too focused on their limitations to see the opportunities. What I try to do is make people focus on the opportunities and help them understand that if they recognise their potential and put in the hard work, they can fulfil their dreams. Most people have dreams, but don't believe in them," he says.

In his travels, he sees Indians daring to dream. Awareness and aspirations have grown, and he is pleased that mobile technology has played a part in this sea change. “What people aspire to now would have been unthinkable 10 years ago. TV and mobile technology are at the forefront of this social change,” he says.

Mukerji is having “a whole lot of fun” at Vodafone. He is growing and learning to delegate, now that he has nine business heads reporting to him – a big change for a person who used to want to be down in the trenches with the troops. “It helps me draw back a bit and think more strategically,” he says.

In his opinion, mobiles have also reduced the generation gap because parents and children now communicate more. As an example, he says that he feels very close to his daughter Sanjita simply because they communicate frequently by phone and SMS, and he feels he can relate to most of what she tells him.

To demonstrate the power of speedy communication during moments of crisis, he relates the story of how Sanjita was feeling frustrated and confused about some issue recently. The father and daughter have a habit of writing to each other in verse. She sent him a poem about her feelings that he received while on a visit to Patna. “I could tell the emotion was serious. I sent her a reply, in verse, within 10 minutes. Somehow, it defused everything. When I met her two days later, she was fine. So without having to interrupt what I was doing, I was able to respond to her need instantly. If I hadn’t, her feelings might have festered,” he says.

I am about to leave, relieved that he ended up giving me an hour of his time rather than the 30 minutes he had originally allotted for the interview, when a stray question reveals that Mukerji belongs to a distinguished film industry family, which includes his father Subodh, his uncle Sasadhar Mukerji who set up Filmistan Studio, actresses Rani Mukerji and Kajol, and numerous cousins who were actors, producers, directors or distributors.

He was the only person in the family who did not join the film industry because he wanted to do something different. He went to IIT Bombay for a bachelor’s degree in technology with a specialisation in mechanical engineering. Mukerji’s first job was with Shaw Wallace in 1986 before he joined PepsiCo and Hutch.

Mukerji has five phones/wireless devices – one is a normal phone for voice and SMS; the second is a BlackBerry for emails, Facebook and taking pictures; the third is a tablet for looking at email attachments, YouTube and entertainment; the fourth is a private phone for the family; and the fifth is kept for the spare battery.

Even his 84-year-old mother is a happy and astute user of mobiles. “She goes around urging people to have dual-SIM cards so that they can use the free talktime that some plans offer. She has also just started using SMS. She told me the other day, ‘when I call you, you sound in a hurry but when I send you an SMS, your reply is nice’.”

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