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DISCERNING THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN REALITY AND PERCEPTION - EXPERIENCES OF PETROL PUMP ATTENDANTS WHILE DEALING WITH CUSTOMERS

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ABSTRACT

Petrol pump attendants may be ill-treated at times owing to preconceived notions about them or the media publicizing their unfavorable image. The paper aims at sharing the experiences of the petrol pump attendants to sensitize the customers towards them. It also aims to change the rigid perceptions that people have about petrol pump attendants and acquaint them with some realities.

KEYWORDS

petrol pump attendants, service encounters.

ABBREVIATION

FSM - Fuel Service Man

INTRODUCTION

A petrol pump is a place that people visit at least once a week or even more. These are one of those few people, whom we encounter with frequently. Even though the interaction may not last for more than a couple of minutes, they strive hard for customer satisfaction if not delight.

Especially in India, this is one of the jobs that is loaded with heavy stereotyping. People always are under the impression that all of them are dishonest, rude and can be lured by money.

Mentioned below are some situations that we might have undergone or seen people going through: We have counterfeit or damaged notes; where to go? Petrol Pump. We are in a foul mood and the vehicle shows reserve indication; whom to vent out the frustration on? The petrol pump attendant. The vehicle gives an average on the lower side: whom to blame? The petrol pump attendant!

Some reality and some myths have put this community in a fix and made their life miserable. Other than Late Mr. Dhirubhai Ambani who was one of the world's richest men who started his career as a petrol pump attendant and Colonel Sanders, the founder of KFC who owned gas stations that served chicken dinners in 1940s and 1950s, there is hardly anyone else of this genre who is spoken of. There are very few who know about the reality and the problems faced by the petrol pump attendants.

The paper offers a sneak peek of the various experiences of petrol pump attendants with their customers.

OBJECTIVES

1. To discover the petrol pump attendants' experiences when encountering customers.
2. To make people aware of the other side of the petrol pump attendants.
3. To sensitize people about the petrol pump attendants in order to minimize stereotyping and be more considerate the next time they visit a petrol pump.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

190 petrol pump attendants working at company owned and managed outlets of a reputed fuel brand in the city of Ahmedabad were interviewed for collecting the primary data. Random sampling method was followed; even then an effort was made to get a fair representation of the attendants working in all the three shifts. Only petrol pump attendants working at the company owned and managed outlets in the same city were chosen so that other factors affecting their interactions with the customers would remain more or less constant.

THE UNTOLD STORIES

The petrol pump attendants do a variety of jobs ranging from housekeeping, air filling, oil changing, accompanying the petrol tanker from the depot to the pump, petrol filling, handling cash, solving customer complaints and so on. Most of their jobs involve interactions with the customers. A petrol pump attendant interacts with hundreds of customers daily during the day shift. The attendants said that they had almost become experts in reading faces of the customers. Most of the customers that came to the pump were good and appreciative, but a few were cranky and non-cooperative.

The FSMs had humongous experiences to share. The experiences have been categorized as follows:

1. DELIGHTFUL INCIDENCES

The job of the FSMs is not that bad and they too have their share of happiness at work. Thanks to some customers. The attendants shared a few incidences where the customers went out of the way to express gratitude to them.

- A student appearing for his tenth standard board examinations happened to forget money at home and wanted a fifty rupee fuel filled in his bike. He promised to pay back after the examination. The petrol pump attendant, trusting the boy, filled up the fuel and to his surprise after a couple of hours, the boy returned to the pump with his mother and handed over the money with a tip of gratitude for the outstanding help.
- One of the regular customers to the pump was always amazed by this petrol pump attendant's daughter for her hard work and excellence in academics. After this girl cleared her entrance for chartered accountancy, the customer gifted her a laptop to keep up her motivation.
- Once, a regular customer noticed that the petrol pump attendant was not keeping well. He was a doctor and he gave his visiting card to the attendant and asked him to visit his clinic. The customer supported the attendant throughout the treatment with free consultation and medication till the attendant recovered from the illness.

2. LOYAL CUSTOMERS

Serving thousands of people every day, the FSMs get an opportunity to build relationships with many for good. The loyal customers go out of the way and reciprocate to make the relationship stronger. Below are some examples:

- An old man with his grandson was pushing the car to the pump as the car had run out of fuel. An FSM saw him and helped him get the car to the pump. The man was highly obliged and since then became a loyal customer of the pump and family doctor to that FSM.
- A customer once started arguing over the amount of fuel filled in his two wheeler; as it exceeded the capacity of the fuel tank. After great difficulty, he was convinced to allow FSM to decant the fuel from his vehicle into a Government approved measure to show him that the actual amount of fuel was exactly the same as he was charged for. Since then, he became a loyal customer to the pump.
- There is a loyal customer who gets tea for all the FSMs each time he visits the pump.
- There is another regular customer who makes it a point to come to the pump from the other side of the city to give the FSMs diwali gifts.

3. RISKING LIVES

An FSM's job is not only limited to delivering good service to customers but also ensuring their safety and security when they are at the pump. This involves constant vigilance, adhering to SOPs along with a constant risk of life for the FSMs.

- CNG filling was in progress at a pump and there was smoke seen coming from the bonnet. The FSM opened the bonnet and saw fire. The customer ran away leaving the car. The FSMs pushed the car outside the pump and extinguished the fire with a fire extinguisher.
- A customer's son was playing with a toy gun when the fuel filling was in progress. It acted as a lighter and caught fire. The same was extinguished by the FSM with a fire extinguisher.
- An FSM got minor burns while filling air in a two wheeler, when the driver denied switching off the engine.

4. WORKING HARD FOR CUSTOMER SATISFACTION

The FSMs may not know flowery language and may not be expert salesmen, but in their own small ways they make sure to go beyond their ways to build a loyal customer base. Here are some examples:

- In two different incidents, the FSMs returned a cell phone and some cash fallen from the customers' pockets. The happiness of the customers knew no bounds to see their sheer honesty.
- A lady with a two wheeler arrived to fill fuel, and in a hurry forgot to pick up her kid on the way back. An FSM traced the school's address with the help of the school I- card and took the kid to the school.
- In the rush hours, after filling fuel a customer paid money and forgot to collect the change. He returned after a couple of days to ask for the change and was delighted to find out that the change was safely kept in an envelope with his name.
- A petrol pump attendant found a cell phone on the floor whilst filling air at the air tower. When he asked the customer who was getting air filled, whether it belonged to him, he nodded and took the cell phone away. Another customer returned in a few minutes complaining about his missing cell phone. The attendant then realized that the phone was handed over to the wrong customer. The attendant found out the customer's residence, recovered the phone and handed it over to the owner in a week.

5. NOT SO GOOD SURPRISES

Every coin has two sides and here is the other side of an FSM's job at the pump. Some customers don't cease to take off smile from the FSM's face. There were some incidences where the petrol pump attendants faced situations that were not only disappointing but also surprising.

- A customer filled fuel worth a hefty amount and denied having cash. A petrol pump attendant agreed to go to the customer's residence with him to collect the money. On reaching the building, the customer pretended to make a call and asked the attendant to collect the money from a certain flat in the building from his wife. To the bitter surprise of the attendant, there was nobody on the floor waiting with cash and by the time he came back to the parking, the customer had fled.
- A customer was denied fuel since he was talking over the cell phone. The customer abused the attendant, left the pump in anger and returned with a few people to fight. A new canteen boy also got beaten up in the fight and a few attendants got minor wounds.
- A customer filled fuel and left and returned the next day to fill the same amount of fuel. The customer then refused to pay saying that the fuel indicator did not move the previous day after the fuel top up. The petrol pump attendant had to bear the loss for the same from his pocket.
- A customer arrived in a four wheeler to fill fuel; however, was unable to open the fuel tank lock. The FSM helped him in doing so, filled the fuel and the customer left without paying for the fuel taking advantage of the situation and never returned back.
- An FSM had to fill fuel worth 100 rupees complimentary for a customer when his vehicle's fuel indicator failed to move even after filling fuel. The FSM had to pay for the same.

6. COUNTERFEIT NOTES

Customers bring a lot of fake notes at the pump for circulation; however, the attendants are well trained to identify them. In spite of that, they end up accepting some during peak hours. The pumps do have machines that help to identify counterfeit notes. If found so at the end of the shift, the petrol pump attendant ends up paying for the difference.

The petrol pump attendants shared a few stories about it:

- A regular customer tried to pass a counterfeit note to the petrol pump attendant by placing a cookie packet on the note and involving the attendant in a chat, but the attendant was smart enough to identify the note and politely asked for a replacement, to which the customer agreed.
- A customer handed over counterfeit money and when the attendant realized it, the attendant asked for another note. The customer refused and started arguing. After the superior's intervention the guest was pacified; he agreed to swipe his card but also sought apology from the petrol pump attendant for his behavior.

7. TRIPS TO THE PETROL DEPOT

The petrol comes to the pump everyday by a tanker and an FSM needs to go to the nearby petrol depot early morning and accompany the tanker to the pump to avoid any adulteration and pilferages. Usually this trip is undertaken by an FSM on the day subsequent to his weekly off.

Unfortunately, this is not an easy job as it sounds like.

- Once on the way back, an FSM was beaten up badly when he tried to stop the driver from decanting some fuel illegally; though the driver was then fired from the job for the act.
- At an incident when the tanker driver caused a road mishap, the FSM too was beaten up for no fault of his.

8. THE NIGHT SHIFT STORIES

During the night shift there are usually not more than two to three FSMs at the pump owing to the low sale during that shift. Some customers tend to take advantage of the fact to get free fuel and some thieves are on the lookout to do something fishy.

- A couple of drunken youngsters came to the pump after a World Cup Match and started creating menace. The security guard on duty found it difficult to handle and hence the police was called for. The police instructed to shut the pump.
- A car speeded after filling up the fuel without paying money taking advantage of the less manpower at night. Since then the FSMs close one gate of the pump to avoid reoccurrence of such situations.
- Two men, on the way back after filling fuel picked up the security guard's gun kept on the chair when the guard had gone to relieve himself. This created a panic at the pump and they informed the police. After a couple of hours, the men placed the gun back at the pump.
- At an incident, a cash theft did occur at the pump when the FSMs were busy filling fuel and some boys succeeded in stealing some cash from the office and running way.

CONCLUSION

The experiences of the petrol pump attendants help to gain insights about functioning of petrol pumps, behavior of customers coming to the petrol pumps, various situations that the petrol pump attendants encounter as a part of their jobs and the hardships they face. Their job is not confined only to serving customers, but encompasses morality, humanity, risk of lives to safeguard people and property, representing the brand and much more. The experiences speak for due respect and consideration that they deserve for their work.

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