

CASE STUDY

A Shoe for Every Foot

Will Mansfield's problem of selling technologically-engineered sports shoes be solved by training his sales team in sports and fitness?

KARL Mansfield felt very good. If there was anything he enjoyed doing immensely, it was selling shoes. Once a *week*, Mansfield donned a tracksuit and sold shoes at any of the 13 Geymini-I stores, exclusive and dedicated outlets for Teffer US' sports shoes. And that was what he was going to do that day at the South Extension outlet in New Delhi.

For Mansfield, who was the director of sales & marketing at Teffer India, the feedback he got from the people who visited these stores was more valuable than all the research they did at Teffer. Even watching his sales team gave him fresh insights into sales training. And training the sales team was a critical issue for Mansfield, who found that mere product knowledge or selling skills were not enough for his mission in India.

As he moved around the store, Mansfield heard Tanya Guha, one of the sales consultants at the store, tell a customer: "So you work out at Body Beat... they have wooden floors, don't they? Therefore, you need shoes with cushioning in your forefoot, not on your heel, because in aerobics you use your forefoot more," she was saying. Guha was the store's fitness specialist and had been trained in aerobics by their fitness instructor. Mansfield could see her demonstrating to the customer who was listening with rapt attention.

Later he spoke to Guha. "I feel most satisfied with the way I come across to customers," she said: "It is not so much the sale of a pair of shoes, but the fact that the benefit statement I made linked the lady's need to the features of the Teffer Bounce," Guha said. "I don't think this empathy was there before," she continued. "After the training in fitness, I find I am able to appreciate the usage situation better and sell according to a consumer's need," she said. Guha had to admit that her whole approach to selling had undergone a sea-change since the intensive specialty training she had undergone the previous month.

This was what Mansfield had come to realise eight months ago. Until then, the sales team sold product features and value addition. But this, he had found, was not linked to the consumer's need or his usage situation. And it had taken him a lot of effort in

understanding the Indian market and gearing the sales training to address this market. It was not easy for a product like shoes which were positioned exclusively for sports and fitness. Whatever the advertising effort, he realised that the real conversion would come only at the point of purchase.

Two years ago when Mansfield had looked at the Indian consumer's attitude to sports and fitness and footwear as a part of that, he found there was very little involvement in sports. The shoes in the market were positioned for sports in general, with little or no differentiation for different sports. Mansfield knew that each sport and fitness activity had a different impact on the foot and, therefore, on the overall efficiency of the wearer.

He had noticed during his many market visits that for every 100 buyers of shoes, 20 looked for sports-specific shoes. But Mansfield knew he had to reach out to the other 80 who were non-sports shoe buyers, by creating an overall awareness of physical fitness - what conventional marketers would blandly call 'growing the market'. But this would require segmenting Indian buyers into two broad categories: adults, who were less likely to take to sports - these he would invest with an ethos for physical fitness by spreading a passion for walking or jogging or aerobics; and children who in their formative years could be invested with an interest in sports and fitness, through their schools.

The social and industrial environment in India also seemed to favour Teffer. People had begun to work longer hours, which meant more and more Indians would be receptive to fitness habits in their daily life, he had reasoned. Mansfield, therefore, decided to leave the core sports segment aside and address the 80% of non-sports shoe buyers.

But Teffer needed to do a lot more before actually putting its shoe on every foot. Interest in sports and physical fitness was limited. At the school level where the interest had to be built, there was tremendous pressure on children to perform. And the few who did play a sport were under pressure to win a match or get their seeding high. Sports was certainly not perceived as a fun activity, he realised.

Teffer's were technologically-engineered sports shoes and many of the features and benefits were not apparent in their visual design. At the first training session for the Geymini - I sales team, Mansfield took a pair of Teffer shoes apart and explained the entire design and engineering. He said: "We want people to buy Teffer not so much for the visual appeal but for the value they are going to get for their wear. It is the sum of many engineering skills and technological inputs in the design. But for that, Teffer could be any other shoe. At a very basic level it's the foot, if not the shoe, that is an integral part of playing a game," explained Mansfield. "Therefore, the agility of a sportsman is

rendered by his foot movement. Keeping this in mind, we have to link the foot to the shoe and the resultant value delivery," he explained.

In those early days, Mansfield realised that he needed to first create an appreciation for what Teffer stood for amongst his associates - the advertising agency, vendors, manufacturers; the need to concede that the foot depended on the shoe for its efficiency and stamina.

And this realisation came when he saw the first few campaigns for Teffer shoes. The first thing that jarred was the bold copy line - 'This is my shoe, my attitude'. The visuals caused him more dissatisfaction. It showed cricket players in different situations: 20% of the visuals was focused on the Teffer shoe; the rest consisted of green fields, white sportswear and blue skies. Mansfield was disappointed that the product benefits were not highlighted either in the copy or the visuals.

The agency felt that India was a cricket crazy country and a cricket star would be a big draw. But when Mansfield's team tested the campaigns among prospects, the responses startled him. "Is Teffer publicising a sports person or is it talking to me about the shoe and how it benefits me?" asked one respondent. "That Teffer benefits Vinod Kambli is a valuable piece of information, but I want to see what is so special about the shoe he wears," exclaimed another. Asked a third respondent: "It's an added benefit that the world's great sportsmen associate with Teffer, but what else is special?"

Therefore, said Mansfield, the 80% focus in the advertising on sports stars had to change to a greater focus on product features. But for that, he realised, the agency team needed to have a little more than product knowledge. No doubt he had taken team members through a detailed presentation on product features and discussed the product manual in great detail, but it had resulted in a lot of 'attitude' advertising with very little focus on product benefits. It was clear to him that the agency had tried to replicate the current attitude advertising that Teffer was using internationally. But that was too premature for a market like India where a technologically-engineered shoe was a new product concept.

Mansfield noticed the same gaps in the attitudes of his store managers in Delhi, Mumbai and Bangalore. The sales at these stores did not reveal a clear pattern. Not all buyers were fitness or sports enthusiasts though a number of buyers were keen tennis or cricket players. "How is the consumer responding?" asked Mansfield. "They don't seem to be fitness enthusiasts," said one store manager. 'And they don't seem to know what they really want. Many don't play any sport. What do I say to them?' he asked. "All I gather is, they are aware of a brand called 'Teffer'."

But something nagged Mansfield. "What do they ask when they come here?" he asked. The store manager pulled out some notes he had made and read: "We want shoes in which we can walk, run ... Shoes in which we can live in' or, 'I don't have any particular pursuit, but I do a bit of walking. Like I walk to the vegetable market and do the buying .. just so that I walk a bit."

"Fine," said Mansfield, "and what do you offer them? "I offer them the Terra Star but usually they pick up a shoe that they find visually appealing," said the store manager.

Mansfield felt that the concept of uncovering needs had not been realised. "The most effective way of selling is when you sell to meet needs," he said. "You should uncover the need in a manner that does not intimidate the customer. A customer does not walk into a store and decide he must start playing tennis or jog. Our shoes are made for stability, cushioning; even if he does not play any sport you could market to him the need to give his feet the right kind of protection," said Mansfield. Therefore, he felt that it was important to let the customer experience the shoe. "Once he feels the product on his feet, his whole response and reaction alters," said Mansfield. "For that is where the real invitation lies. They have to experience a Teffer to know how it is different from any other shoe."

Mansfield realised he needed to change the mindsets of the very people who were vested with the task of communicating about the shoe. It was with this in mind that he met Vidisha Nath, the human resource head of Teffer India.

"There is something missing," he told her. All the product knowledge, visual merchandising and selling skills training are okay at one level. But it strikes me that both the sales and advertising teams lack a level of empathy with sports or the value delivered by Teffer. They know Teffer shoes and some even have a working knowledge of sports. But they have not been able to translate the product benefits into an enhanced experience with sports and fitness," he said.

"Karl," said Nath, "I think this has a lot to do with the fact that technologically-engineered shoes are a totally new product concept in the country. How then can people who have not experienced such a shoe make a convincing sales pitch? Unless I have used a washing machine, I cannot talk about its benefits," she said. "Exactly my perception too," said Mansfield. "So either we hire sportsmen as our sales consultants or we train our sales consultants in fitness activities," he said.

Nath was taken aback by Mansfield's suggestion. "Hiring sportsmen will be impossible," she said emphatically. "A tennis player is unlikely to choose retailing shoes."

as a profession. Don't forget tennis is an up-market hobby in India, usually the choice of the affluent," she added.

"Given that," said Mansfield, "we will use the next option - train our sales team in sports and fitness. They must first use the product they are required to sell, experience it, raise doubts as consumers and seek answers from product development departments. This will be the real test market for product acceptance. Once the sales people accept the benefits of the product, they are more likely to make a better sales pitch - a sales pitch that is based on experience with the product in a usage situation, and not just a product manual," he said.

What Mansfield said made a lot of sense, but Nath had her doubts, even as Mansfield said: "Therefore, we will get both teams to train in tennis, football, cricket and fitness," he said. But Nath was a trifle anxious. Three days later she called Mansfield and said: "I have tried to evaluate the cost of the new training idea you have," she said. "We have already spent Rs 20 lakh on training the store managers and the various sales consultants. Now you are suggesting retraining along different lines. You are also adding new segments - the agency, the production team at Flight Footwear which manufactures the shoes for us and the key vendors of Flight. Are you saying that our four-week product training was inadequate?" she asked.

"Let me put it this way," said Mansfield. "You can't sell a Mercedes 600 by just reading the product manual. Nor can we hire a Maruti 800 salesman, give him a book and say 'This is how to sell a Mercedes 600' and expect him to sell it," said Mansfield. "Whether they are creating advertisements or giving us market feedback or a report or an idea, unless they experience and understand the core product benefits they will not be saying the right things," he added.

The next day, Mansfield discussed his plan with the advertising agency team. "We are putting you through the first part of our training in fitness. Our instructor will take you through the process of walking, jogging and running. You will experiment with different types of shoes, both Teffer and others, and their impact on your feet and efficiency," he said. "In the next stage we will take you through tennis and basketball using the same pattern," he said.

The agency was both startled and intrigued. "Why do we have to play tennis to know your product benefits?" asked the creative head. "Advertising is about showing benefits," said Mansfield. "How can you show the product's benefits when you haven't experienced it? For instance," he asked, "if you were to make an ad for tennis shoes what part of the product would you show? The upper, the insole or the outer sole? If

you have played tennis, you would know by looking at the outer sole whether the shoe is made for a hard court, clay court or a grass court. Therefore, when we design an ad for tennis shoes, we would want only the outsole to show."

Nath, who had designed much of the training session, felt it was necessary to explain why Teffer India insisted on the sales and advertising teams personally using the products. "Before any of you try and sell Teffer shoes to anyone else, it is important for Mansfield and me to 'sell' Teffer to you," she said. "Although you have been trained in the product's features, in selling skills and so on, the brand benefits will be more apparent when you actually use the product and experience the value in a usage situation," she explained.

Mansfield wanted the agency to be able to appreciate the differences between types of Teffer shoes. "You have three products to advertise - walking shoes, tennis shoes and basketball shoes. Do you know how they are different?" he asked. "What will be your body copy? I don't want statements like, '... Here's the real thing. It does not make sense. We want to talk about the benefits that are important to prospective customers. Now if your creative head has had no interaction with sports and has not played on the field, he will not be able to link the product features with the usage situation. Nor will he come up with any truly inspiring copy," said Mansfield.

The agency team and the sales team went through the training in batches and at every stage Mansfield was present to see that his objective was hammered home. On the tennis court, he used the Teffer Tennis to demonstrate the value of the product to the game. "You will find that the heel counter of the Teffer Tennis is much stronger than that of any other shoe. Now notice how the game causes you to drag your feet. Feel the toe cap ... firm and strong ... that is what provides protection while you are playing. And once you have played tennis wearing the Teffer Tennis, you will be able to explain to your audience why the user is paying extra for the shoe."

No doubt he had explained all this before. But now in the light of their experience with the sport, his words had a deeper impact. Mansfield now felt the stores needed to build networks with sports clubs and gyms. Walking, Mansfield realised, was more common as a fitness activity since many people did not play a sport or were not members of a club. This group was a critical consumer segment, but he also realised that it was less likely to visit his stores.

"I do not want store managers to think that their job is from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. in a 600 sq ft store in South Extension," said Mansfield. "Their job is to make contact with fitness clubs and go to places where people actually indulge in these activities. Go to Lodhi Gardens, to Joggers Park and start talking to people about walking. That is where you

make the first conversion to fitness. Many of these people are not likely to visit your store, because they do not perceive the need for walking shoes. While you might get a customer for tennis shoes, your walking customer has to be lured, invited and educated. Priyadarshini Park is your marketplace," he told the Mumbai store manager.' "That's the market you cannot reach sitting in a store. So go out and look for your customer, go to the venues where people walk, run or jog," he said. "Talk to them about their feet. You are going there to improve the attitude to walking and the value of walking as an activity. In the process, you will explain to them the need for appropriate footwear to enhance the value of their activity," explained Mansfield.

Now as he pinned his identity card to his shirt, to start his day selling shoes, he recalled the efforts of the last eight months. He felt his earlier anxieties vanish. The training in sports and fitness had provided them with all the empathy he needed them to have.

As Rajan Rai, his Mumbai store manager said: "In my last job, I was selling cooking ranges and although I did have the company's brand of cooking range in my home because I got a hefty discount, I don't think I could really call myself a user of the product. I did not know how cakes or biscuits were baked, or from the user's point of view whether there was any shortcoming in the product. So when customers complained that the cake did not set at the given time, or that the cookies burnt easily. I was not knowledgeable enough to know that the level of the shelf on which the baking tray was placed also made a difference to the cake or cookie. It strikes me now that had I used the cooking range myself, I would have been able to advise my customers better. Yet I sold cooking ranges. I was telling prospective customers various things like heating elements and powder coated painting, which were mere product features, but I was not linking the product's features to the housewife's usage situation." And this is what Mansfield felt most salesmen lacked.

At the end of the training period, Nath asked Mansfield: "Karl, was the Rs 28 lakh we spent on this specialised training, worth it?" Mansfield paused before he said: "Vidisha, what we did in the first place was the basic and most obvious level of training. The point is that did not give us the level of satisfaction we want. If we are not convinced of its efficacy, clearly it is not going to satisfy the consumer who does not even know about our shoes. What we have done is invested in maximising customer value. I am not even trying to increase our market-shares. I am doing something else: I am improving the perception of our products among our associates to enable them to market the need for our product. This might help convert 5% of my browsers into real consumers. Now is it worth Rs 28 lakh to get that 5% conversion? And I am saying that sum is basic to delivering the best value!"