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IN AI WE TRUST



TRUST DRIVES AI SUCCESS

Vala Afshar, Henry King, and Irene Yam

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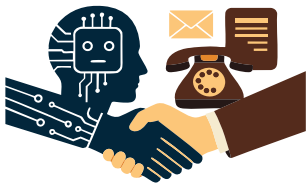
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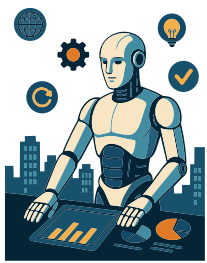
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The Art of Necessary Discord: Building Teams That Think in Counterpoint

T V Narendran is CEO & Managing Director, Tata Steel.

Technology has always reshaped the way businesses operate—from electricity to the internet, each wave brought disruption, doubt, and eventual transformation. AI is next such wave. It is making change faster and more complex, opening new possibilities and responsibilities for how organisations earn the trust of customers.

AI promises automation of tasks and decisions that would otherwise require large, expensive teams, and offers flexibility of scale at marginal cost. It can enhance customer experience, personalise services, and unlock insights hidden in data. The potential is enormous; so is the responsibility. The question is not whether AI will matter, but how it can be applied safely, meaningfully, and to genuine customer advantage.

AI is powerful, but not infallible. It does not absolve management of the rigour, oversight, or responsibility of the outcomes it generates. Like every major technology in its early years, it will evolve through cycles of progress and correction. Errors and biases are inevitable because AI relies on digitised information that may or may not be validated. Its effectiveness depends not only on algorithms and training datasets but also on the quality of human supervision and the intent behind its use. If neglected, AI can easily turn from a business advantage into a business risk.

While optimism is justified, realism is essential. It may take years to smooth out AI's current limitations—its tendency to hallucinate, misread context, or deliver uneven accuracy.

In some tasks, AI shows near-human ability; in others, it falls short in surprising ways. The jagged edge of intelligence is what makes it fascinating and occasionally frustrating. As with any emerging technology, early overconfidence can backfire. Businesses must treat AI as an evolving assistant, not an infallible expert.

There is also a question of inexperienced implementation. AI systems introduced without a deep understanding of technical limitations or customer context presents risks, both reputational and financial. Inept self-service systems, such as dead-end chatbots or rigid interactive voice response (IVR) menus, can frustrate customers and drive them to competitors. Naive applications of AI which lack contextual data and miss the complexity of human choices, leave customers bemused. In such cases, AI becomes a barrier to customer engagement instead of an enabler. A recent study cites that up to 95 percent of AI deployments are struggling. The potential of AI sounds magical, and it is, but only in narrow and specific situations in the hands of experienced implementers.

The path to customer trust in AI does not begin with AI itself, but with data. Instead of hasty rollouts and short-sighted cost savings, organisations should first invest in data quality, governance, and customer-centric design. Once those foundations are strong, AI can amplify value safely and sustainably. The more specific the scope which can be proven to delight the customers, the better it is. Case in

point, Apple's rollout of "Apple Intelligence", widely perceived as underwhelming, is a reminder that rushing to follow trends can erode credibility and customer confidence rather than enhance it.

Building customer trust in AI-enabled processes and transactions involves establishing consistent AI competence, transparency in decision-making, and accountability for actions. Explainability is fundamental to customer trust. Customers respond poorly to businesses that present AI as a black box. For example, an AI that recommends related options should state the basis of its recommendation. Banking AI must explain why a loan or credit card request was approved or rejected.

In addition to transparency and explainability, AI must have failsafes. When customers encounter issues not covered by AI's menu or decision tree, there must be an easy path to a human representative. AI should facilitate and not gate keep interactions. A human in the loop is a necessity; not an exception. Systems should seamlessly switch to human support when AI fails to satisfy the customer.

Though AI relies on data, customers should not be made to feel that they are merely data sources. Care must be taken to collect, store, use, and share only the data essential to delivering the product or service. Customers' ability to refuse non-essential data without losing service is fundamental to trust. Customers are more willing to share critical information when assured

of security and meaningful benefits. It is important to communicate that AI works with probabilities rather than fixed formulas and to offer customers ways to address errors and exceptions. As AI models continuously evolve, organisations must update AI practices and algorithms to ensure consistency of interaction and output.

Equally important is Accountability for AI's actions. Even when AI functions are outsourced, customers hold the brand accountable and expect the businesses to take responsibility for mistakes and mishaps. Providing verifiable audits of AI-facilitated interactions and transactions is essential for trust. Service-level agreements where AI is involved can reinforce confidence.

Ethics adds another layer of responsibility. Training data should reflect fairness, legality and inclusiveness, and be refreshed regularly to mirror the changing social norms and regulations. AI systems must be retrained when they breach ethical boundaries to avoid alienating segments of customer base or damaging reputation.

AI is not a replacement for human judgement but a reflection of it. Trust in AI begins with trust in the people and principles behind it. When technology is guided by transparency and accountability, customers don't just use it, they believe in it. And if you are wondering whether this article was written by AI—it could have been, but only humans can give it meaning. 

The opinion expressed is personal.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Dear Readers,

We live and operate in rapidly-evolving global economy, where businesses must go beyond conventional team-building practices to remain competitive and innovative. One powerful, yet often underutilised strategy, is fostering personality diversity within teams and organisations.

Fostering personality diversity entails not only acknowledging the variety of personality styles in an organisation but also intentionally leveraging those differences to strengthen collaboration and problem-solving. When teams are composed of individuals with varying communication styles, thinking patterns, and approaches to decision-making, they become more resilient and adaptable.

Diverse personalities encourage a broader range of perspectives, which fuels innovation and helps businesses navigate complex challenges more effectively. Moreover, understanding personality differences fosters empathy, reduces internal conflict, and improves team cohesion. Leaders who prioritise personality diversity create environments where individuals feel valued for who they are, leading to higher engagement, productivity, and satisfaction.

In a world where agility and creativity are key to success, embracing personality diversity is not just a progressive idea—it's a business imperative. As Paul Grant, co-author, *Personalities Remixed*, writes in the cover story of this issue, "Personality diversity is not a buzzword—it is a strategic advantage. By embracing this revolutionary school of thought, businesses can unlock the full potential of their people."

Do write in with your views to imeditorial@spentamultimedia.com

Maneck Davar
Maneck Davar

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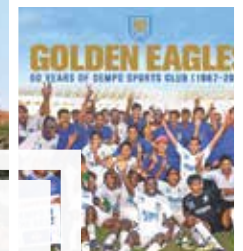
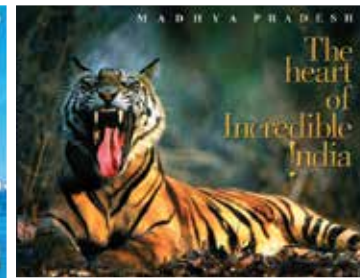
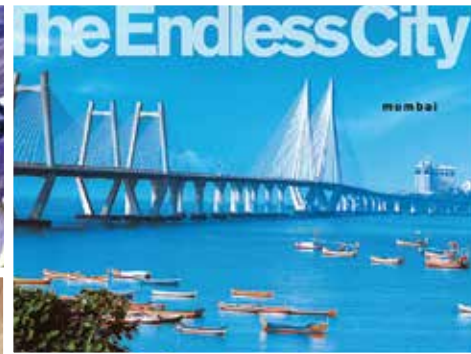
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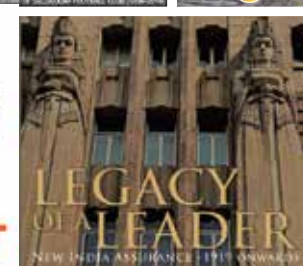
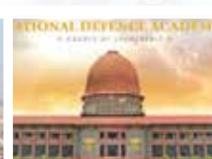
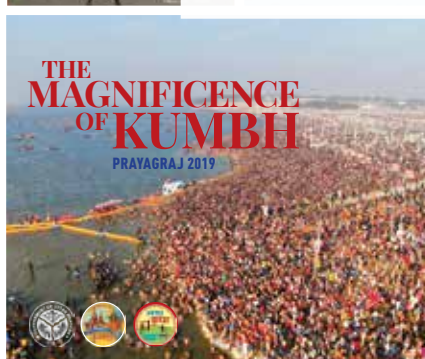
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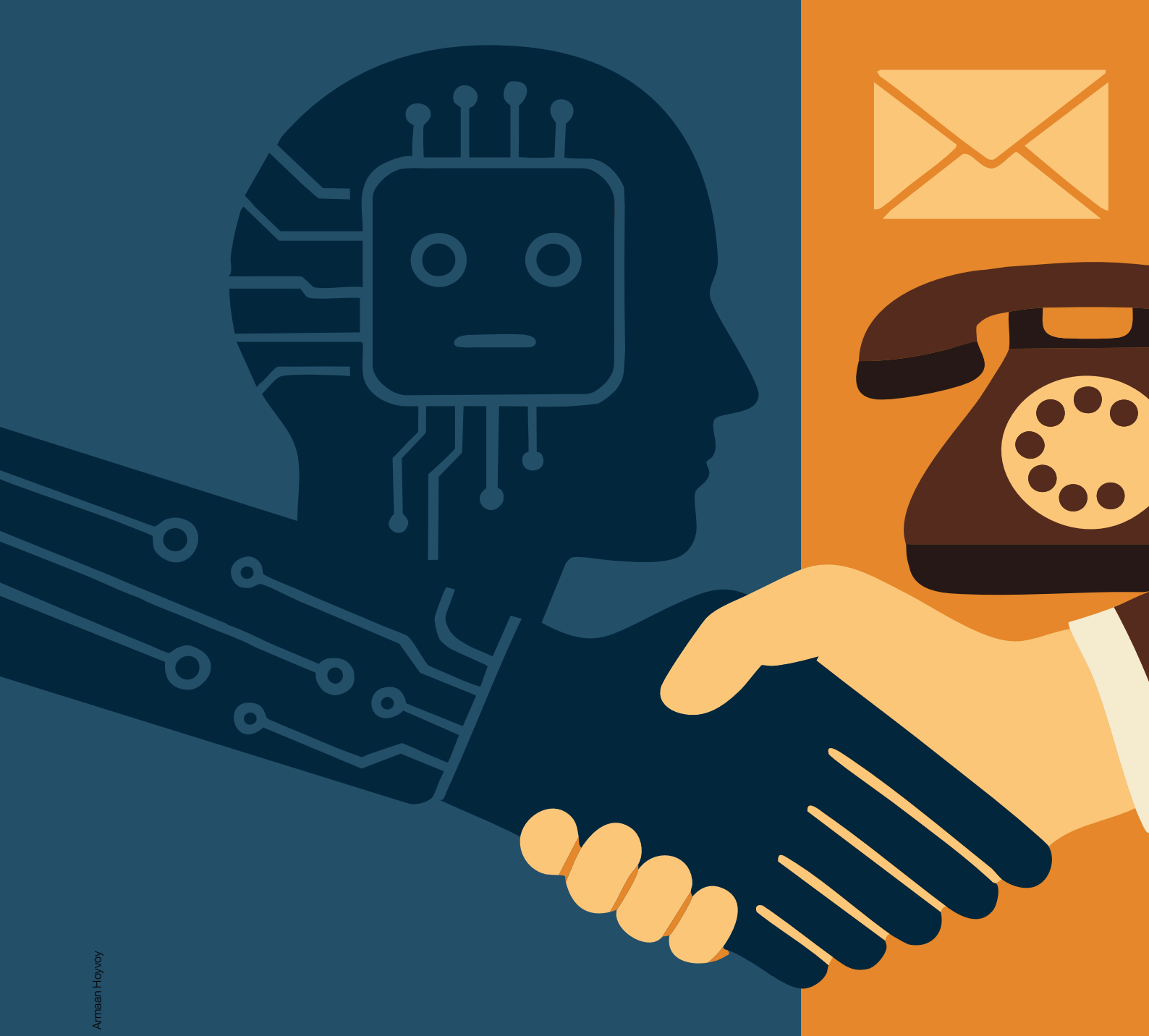
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TRUST: THE NEW
CURRENCY IN THE
AI ECONOMY



Armaan Hoyoy

Trust drives AI success

In the AI economy, trust is the ultimate technology.

♦ VALA AFSHAR AND HENRY KING, CO-AUTHORS, *BOUNDLESS AND AUTONOMOUS*; AND IRENE YAM, AUTHOR, *BUILD A WORLD-CLASS CUSTOMER ADVISORY BOARD*

AI vendor's core values and guiding principles, and trust in AI's impact on gaining a competitive edge.

"We all have a trust issue. We all have a gap," says David Horsager, CEO of The Trust Edge Leadership Institute. "There is no communication issue. No collaboration issue. No sales issue. No marketing issue. There is only a trust issue."

A recent report² found that 23 per cent of customers do not trust AI, and 56 per cent are neutral—this deficit in trust can swing in either direction based on how companies use and deliver AI-powered services. The report also found that the benefits of AI are unclear, with only 46 per cent of respondents agreeing that AI will speed up transactions. Increased awareness of personal data security has made trust between providers and customers more crucial than ever. In fact, 78 per cent of customers say they would switch financial service providers if they felt their data was mishandled.

So how do businesses build trust in their customers at this crucial time? In this article we want to focus on two areas. The first is in the sales process and the second is in the customer advisory board (CAB). But before we dive into them, let's first take a look at trust itself.

The elements of trust

Building trust is the key to long-standing business relationships of mutual value. We have all experienced the difference between interacting with someone we trust and someone we don't, but this experience is not just personal or anecdotal. Trust has a direct, quantifiable impact on a company's success, both organisationally and financially. In *The Neuroscience of Trust*³, Paul J. Zak writes:

"Compared with people at low-trust companies, people at high-trust companies report: 74 per cent less stress, 106 per cent more energy at work, 50 per cent higher productivity, 13 per cent fewer sick days, 76 per cent more engagement, 29 per cent more satisfaction with their lives, and 40 per cent less burnout." And the vast majority of us (95 per cent, according to the Salesforce Connected Customer report) are more likely to be loyal to companies that we trust. Being loyal means that we're likely to buy more from them, try out their new products, and refer and recommend them. In "The

Recent research forecasts that Artificial Intelligence will contribute as much as \$19.9T to the global economy and drive 3.5 per cent of global GDP in 2030¹. That said, there are still significant concerns regarding the adoption of AI in business. The biggest obstacle is trust: Trust in the technology, trust in the data quality, trust in the large language models, trust in the automated workflows, trust in the

All business leaders and practitioners, need to demonstrate both capability and character in their individual and collective ways of engaging and working with customers to build and foster trust with them and lead with character

Value of Keeping The Right Customers,”¹⁴ it was discovered that the costs of retaining customers are anywhere from 5 to 25 times less than the costs of acquiring new ones. In other words, there's a direct line from trust to loyalty to increased revenues and reduced costs.

All of which sounds good, but what can be done about it? After all, trust is one of those words that we all understand instinctively, but that sounds fuzzy or soft. According to expert sources (including Rachel Botsman and Deloitte Digital among others), however,

trust can be broken down into four components, all of which are behaviours that can be directly and unambiguously (or un-fuzzily) demonstrated. These four are:

- **Competence:** The ability to carry out the activities and perform the functions expected of you.
- **Reliability:** Doing what you say you will, when you say you will, every time.
- **Integrity (or honesty, transparency):** Telling the truth, doing the right thing, without regard for personal consequences.
- **Intent (or benevolence, motivation, empathy):** Putting the interests and success of the customer first in your decisions and actions.

Out of these four components, the first two are about capabilities, and the second two are about character. It is far more difficult to come back from a perceived weakness of character than it is from one of capability. And character is, at least currently, a uniquely human trait. So in this article, we have chosen to focus on trust-building at this human level. In our latest

book, *Autonomous: Why The Fittest Businesses Embrace AI-First Strategies and Digital Labor*, we discuss which human traits or values will continue to be important in the AI economy. There are some surprises. For instance, we think that effort, hard work, putting in the hours, will start to seem less of a virtue and more of a waste as AI can accomplish more work, more quickly, and more accurately than humans, and so the new focus will be on smart work, on intelligence and speed. There are others, like curiosity and imagination, that we think will become increasingly sought out and admired, and others, like commitment and trust, that will be enduringly important.

All business leaders and practitioners, therefore need to demonstrate both capability and character in their individual and collective ways of engaging and working with customers to build and foster trust with them and lead with character. Here are just two examples, in core pre- and post-sales activities-

Pre-sales and the ‘fourth why’

During the sales cycle, it is good practice to work with prospective buyers to uncover hidden expectations, craft a compelling business case, create a competitive advantage, and establish a sense of urgency. Best practice tells us that, as a sales professional, you must be able to help your buyer answer three questions from their colleagues in order to gain support and approval for a prospective purchase beyond a given size or complexity. And those three questions are called the Three Whys: Why do anything? Why buy from this vendor? Why buy now? These questions get progressively harder to answer. But as it turns out, your customer also has a question for you. It's a question that they're unlikely to actually ask you, regardless of how senior they are or what their title is. And they will always come up with their own answer, whether you like it or not. The question is this: Can I trust you?



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To help your customer answer in the affirmative, there is another question that you need to ask in return, a Fourth Why. But this time it is not your customer that you are asking, and it is not the customer that needs the answer, it is you. It is a question that any sales professional should ask themselves, and the question is this: Why make this sale?

Sellers sell, it is what they do. For many sales professionals selling is in their blood. So asking the question “Why make this sale?” may seem like a pointless exercise. But it is all about understanding intent. It is all about benevolence, the desire to do good to others. Having the right intent or motivation for making a sale can be a crucial differentiator in sales success. Let us explore this in more detail.

The goal of the ‘Fourth Why’ is to answer the last of the Trust components, to understand your Intent. The important thing here is to demonstrate to the buyer that your intent, your interests, and motivation are aligned with theirs. Rachel Botsman has made the point that the root cause of a breakdown of trust between two parties (which could therefore also include the trust between employer and

employee or even between two colleagues) is most often a misalignment of intentions. Buyers can tell when the seller has their own interests, and trust is easily broken when the two sets of motivations or intents are misaligned. Demonstrating to a customer that your motivation for selling is aligned with their best interest is the best way for you to build trust.

How can you demonstrate that your intent and your customer’s intent are the same thing (or at least two sides of the same coin)? You can do this by taking the perspective of standing next to them. Buyers, and especially senior leaders, are being sold to all the time. They know that they’re seen as keepers of the corporate purse strings. The more senior they are, the more budget authority they hold and the fewer hoops they have to jump through to make a procurement decision. And so they have a steady stream of people wanting to sit across the table from them trying to convince them that their company’s offer is just what they need.

But standing next to the buyer instead of sitting across the table from them is an entirely different thing. It forces the seller to see the



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Vala Afshar is co-author, *Autonomous: Why the Fittest Businesses Embrace AI-first Strategies and Digital Labor*.



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world from the leader's perspective, to see all the challenges and opportunities that are in front of them. And it tells the buyer that the seller is on their side and is ready to go into battle with them.

This is obviously similar to the advice to “walk a mile in their shoes” and to “see the world through their eyes”. The difference, and what makes this stronger, is that standing next to your customer goes further than demonstrating empathy with them. It demonstrates not only that you empathise but that you’re right there with them as an active, trusted partner.

So the answer to the ‘Fourth Why’ will always depend on the specific circumstances but in general it will always be the same. The only answer that really counts is this: Because it will make my customer successful and that is my goal. Making this investment in this solution, from me, at this time, will help my customer achieve their objectives and the objectives of their company, and I am going to stand next to them to help them succeed. And

if you show your customer that your intent and their intent are the same, then you might just answer their own question for them.

The Customer Advisory Board

Most C-suite leaders face a common dilemma in customer relationships: they are typically brought in at two crucial moments—either to help close deals or to manage escalations when something goes wrong. Both scenarios put trust under intense scrutiny at high-stakes moments. Building autonomous businesses that can operate with AI-first strategies requires moving beyond this reactive approach to create proactive, systematic trust-building with strategic customers. This is where the Customer Advisory Board (CAB) process becomes essential.

A Customer Advisory Board is a structured post-sales program that brings together a company’s most strategic customers—typically 8–15 senior executives—to provide ongoing guidance on product strategy, market direction, and business priorities. Unlike traditional focus groups or surveys, CABs create sustained, high-



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Henry King is co-author, *Autonomous: Why the Fittest Businesses Embrace AI-first Strategies and Digital Labor*.

trust relationships between customer executives and company leadership, forming the human intelligence layer that informs AI-driven business decisions.

While AI can process data and automate decisions at unprecedented speed, the human

When companies respond quickly and thoughtfully to CAB input, customer executives see their time investment validated through meaningful action, encouraging deeper strategic sharing in future interactions

relationships that guide these systems remain critical. This reactive approach to executive engagement creates missed opportunities for building the deep, strategic relationships that autonomous businesses need. The CAB Process transforms this dynamic by creating a proactive, diplomatic forum where customer and vendor executives can build trust

systematically. Whether conducted virtually or through in-person gatherings that span one to two days, CABs provide a structured environment for strategic conversations that inform AI systems with human context and wisdom.

However, time is the most precious resource for senior executives, both for customers and vendors. This makes measuring CAB effectiveness critical. The following three trust measurements demonstrate how the CAB Process builds lasting relationships while maximising time investment for all parties:

Trust measurement through response quality

- Response time to CAB feedback (demonstrates reliability)
- Follow-through rate on commitments made during sessions (builds integrity)
- Transparency in decision-making processes

shared with the board (shows honest intent)

When companies respond quickly and thoughtfully to CAB input, customer executives see their time investment validated through meaningful action, encouraging deeper strategic sharing in future interactions.

The CAB trust feedback loop

High-quality customer feedback leads to high-quality company responses, which deepen trust and generate even better insights in subsequent meetings. This creates a compounding return on time invested. Each CAB session becomes increasingly valuable as trust grows and conversations shift from tactical to strategic.

How trust translates to customer investment

The most compelling evidence of CAB effectiveness comes from how trust transforms customer behaviour. A 200-employee cybersecurity company invested \$39,240 in their first CAB with 11 CISO-level executives.⁵ As trust deepened through consistent listening and responsive action, these customers didn't just provide feedback—they became invested partners:

- **Accelerated decision-making:** Sales cycles reduced 75 per cent (from months to 2–3 weeks) as trust eliminated lengthy evaluation processes.
- **Deeper engagement:** \$1.5M in revenue directly attributed to CAB relationships as customers expanded their investments.
- **Sustained commitment:** 9/10 executive satisfaction with 90 per cent ongoing engagement, demonstrating long-term partnership mentality.

These outcomes illustrate a fundamental principle: when customers see their input valued and acted upon, they shift from cautious buyers to invested partners. The systematic trust-building of CABs transforms customer relationships from transactional to strategic, creating the deep partnerships that autonomous



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Irene Yam is founder, IY Media. Irene is also, author, *Build a World-Class Customer Advisory Board*.

businesses require.

Summary

Building trust in the AI era: the strategic imperative

As artificial intelligence reshapes business landscapes, the \$19.9 trillion opportunity comes with a fundamental challenge: trust. With 79 per cent of customers still skeptical or neutral about AI, the organisations that will thrive are those mastering the human elements of trust-building alongside technological advancement.

This article reveals how forward-

The path forward is clear: in an age of artificial intelligence, the most sophisticated technology your organisation can deploy may be the systematic cultivation of human trust

thinking leaders are transforming customer relationships through two powerful approaches. The ‘Fourth Why’ in sales—asking yourself “Why make this sale?”—ensures your intent aligns with customer success, creating the foundation for authentic partnerships. Meanwhile, Customer Advisory Boards move beyond reactive

executive engagement to create proactive forums where strategic relationships flourish.

The evidence is compelling: companies implementing structured CAB processes achieve 75 per cent reductions in sales cycles and generate 38 times the revenue for every dollar invested. More importantly, they’re building the trust infrastructure that autonomous businesses require—where AI handles data processing while human relationships provide the strategic context and wisdom that drive sustainable success.

The path forward is clear: in an age of artificial

intelligence, the most sophisticated technology your organisation can deploy may be the systematic cultivation of human trust.

Series Summary: Trust-First Leadership: Building Stakeholder Confidence in the AI Economy

This three-part series concludes how the most successful leaders are turning trust-building into their ultimate competitive advantage as artificial intelligence transforms business at an unprecedented speed.

Series 1 demonstrates how co-creation becomes a competitive advantage, with leaders building trust through collaborative innovation that transforms vendor-client relationships into strategic partnerships. Series 2 shows how resilience through transparency works, with cybersecurity executives building confidence by shifting from “we’ll prevent everything” to “we’ll respond brilliantly.” Series 3 explores systematic trust architecture, revealing how sales and customer success leaders build trust through aligned intentions and structured advisory relationships.

The message is clear: in the AI economy, leaders who thrive are not just implementing new technologies—they are mastering the art of building trust while moving fast, making stakeholder confidence their ultimate competitive moat. **IM**

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The living mentor

Higher education institutions today are judged not only by their rankings or research output, but increasingly by how well they nurture the human potential within their gates.

In recent years, even India's premier campuses—long celebrated for academic excellence—have witnessed a troubling rise in student suicides and mental health emergencies like, repetitive anxiety, depression, self-harm, panic attacks, hallucinations, severe insomnia, etc. Each such loss or mental breakdown reminds us that formal grievance mechanisms or counselling cells, though essential, cannot substitute for genuine human connection.

What institutions need now is a new kind of leadership—managerial yet humane, structured yet social. This is the premise of what we call the living chief people officer in management language, or simply the living mentor in spirit—a reimagined role that blends strategy with sensitivity and embeds wellbeing, belonging, and growth into the rhythm of campus life.

Why a new role?

Academic management has long drawn from corporate and bureaucratic hierarchies: deans, registrars, and other administrative heads, each with defined silos of authority. The dean of student affairs, for instance, is burdened with duties that leave little time for informal engagement with stakeholders—students. Yet, contemporary campus life demands something more porous and people-centred. Several converging realities make this change urgent: **Campuses as micro-societies:** Students, faculty, and staff each face distinct pressures—academic, emotional, and financial. Students arrive with varied expectations, and vulnerabilities, and generally are from highly diverse cultures, ethos and backgrounds; fragmented systems often respond to crises instead of preventing them.

Expanding success metrics: Beyond placements and publications, institutions are now judged by wellbeing, retention, and student experience—across the world, even as part of the metrics in designated formal ranking systems.

Leadership vacuum: Many campuses lack visible yet approachable figures who connect



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organically with students. Without relational leadership, even well-crafted policies fall short.

The living mentor, being envisaged by the author, is the bridge between systems and souls—someone who converts empathy into operational practice.

When an idea meets resistance

When I first discussed this concept informally with one of my brightest PhD mentees—a sharp, fearless thinker—she smiled and called it “just another title, maybe even a work of fiction.” Her reaction, though disarming, was honest. It reflected the fatigue among young scholars who see new designations as more hierarchy than help.

That response reaffirmed the deeper challenge: unless leadership feels alive, visible, and human, even the noblest frameworks risk being dismissed as another bureaucratic layer. I replied to this wonderful mentee with beautiful soul: “The Living Mentor, therefore, is not about nomenclature—it is about presence, trust, and continuity in human engagement”.

Who’s the living mentor?

The living mentor is not a cosmetic reticle of existing roles. Ideally, this person brings an external perspective to academia while understanding its internal culture—someone capable of influencing systems, people, and well-being outcomes. Three attributes define this role:

1. **Presence before crisis:** The living mentor cultivates everyday engagement—sharing meals, joining walks, sitting through rehearsals—so that trust precedes intervention.
2. **Boundary spanning:** Positioned across hierarchies, he connects to students, faculty, support staff, and administrators, fostering collaboration rather than compliance.
3. **Operational accountability:** Beyond goodwill, they have the authority and resources to make things happen—budgets, metrics, and measurable outcomes.

This fusion of empathy and structure differentiates the living mentor from welfare offices or counsellors. It is leadership by being there.

The managerial logic behind it

From a management perspective, the living mentor addresses three chronic challenges cum persistent inefficiencies in institutional life ecosystem:

- **Information asymmetry:** Early signals of stress or conflict often go unnoticed when leadership is distant. Everyday presence surfaces them early.
- **Siloed responses:** Separate departments duplicate effort or deflect responsibility. A cross-functional leader aligns incentives and ensures coordinated response.
- **Reactive culture:** Most institutions respond to crises; few build preventive systems. The Living Mentor reverses that equation.

Viewed through organisational theory—agency, coordination, and culture—the role reduces transaction costs in human systems and enhances institutional resilience.

What the role looks like in practice

The living mentor's daily rhythm is both ordinary and transformative. He might join students on a morning cycle, walk with colleagues across the campus, or share a quiet hour of yoga at dawn with a few early risers. He is rather expected to share lunch with faculty, join them at 'chai-coffee hubs', attend a play rehearsal, and end the day in a quiet chat with hostel residents as well as wardens. These are not symbolic gestures—they are the architecture of trust.

By humanising leadership through shared routines, the living mentor fosters an atmosphere where connection replaces hierarchy, and preventive care replaces damage control. A conversation during a walk often achieves more than a formal meeting in a boardroom.

I. Core responsibilities

- Routine, visible presence across campus.
- Convening a cross-functional wellbeing council.
- Designing a three-year wellbeing and retention strategy.
- Managing a small discretionary fund for immediate support.
- Reporting quarterly on engagement and wellbeing metrics.

II. Skills and profile

- Emotional intelligence and credibility across all campus groups.
- Background in leadership, counselling, and systems management.
- Ability to engage without being performative.

Measuring what matters

Empathy must coexist with evidence. Possible indicators include:

- **Engagement index:** Frequency and quality of informal interactions
- **Time-to-support:** Response time from concern to resolution
- **Retention:** Year-on-year student and staff continuation
- **Incident reduction:** Fewer serious escalations



Make in India aimed to encourage both domestic and international companies to set up manufacturing operations within the country, while also attracting large-scale investments into the sector

•Perception surveys:

Levels of trust in campus leadership

Metrics like these not only validate impact but also institutionalise accountability.

Implementation pathway

Piloting allows flexibility, learning, and adaptation before formal adoption.

Institutions may start small to ensure smooth and organic induction:

1. **Pilot a 12–18-month program:** Assign a leader with a clear mandate.
2. **Create a wellbeing fund:** Empower swift, human-centric responses.
3. **Institutionalise informal interactions:** Weekly open hours, monthly town halls.
4. **Cross-functional coordination:** Integrate registrars, counsellors, and student leaders.
5. **Review and scale:** Use measurable outcomes to justify continuity.

Risks and mitigation

Two main risks loom large: tokenism (a mentor in title but not in authority) and burnout (expecting one person to fix systemic issues). Mitigation include the following CPO specific empowering strategies:

Authority and resourcing: Ensure the role has budgetary autonomy and a small staffed team.

Distributed leadership: Build capability across faculty and staff rather hoarding onus.

Clear boundaries: Define escalation pathways—by clinical services and legal counsel.

Done well, the Living Mentor catalyses system-level change; done poorly, it can generate cynicism. Institutions must invest in this role—

not as a formality, but as a cultural necessity. For its only when students see someone living fully, that they believe they can too.

Beyond academia: A broader lesson

The idea extends beyond campuses. Corporates, hospitals, and government institutions face similar challenges—burnout, disengagement, isolation. Investing in visible, human-centric leadership is no longer a soft skill; it's a strategic necessity. For universities, however, this carries moral gravity. Educational spaces are meant to build not just professionals but human beings. When leadership is lived, not administered, it transforms both.

From title to trust

Ultimately, the Living Mentor is less a position than a presence—a quiet revolution in how institutions care. Such leadership doesn't operate within the system; it becomes the culture—not a crisis responder, but a culture transformer.

In an era where intellectual achievement cannot be separated from emotional wellbeing, the Living Mentor is not a luxury but a necessity: a quiet revolution in how institutions care, connect, and create the conditions for their people to flourish.

Students trust him not because of the badge he wears but because he is one of them, yet a couple of years or decades wiser—a human compass they can turn to. He builds relationships before crises happen, and transforms every casual encounter into a moment of connection.

To faculty, he is a mirror of empathy, understanding the pressures of pedagogy and research, offering quiet leadership through emotional intelligence and example.

To parents, he is reassurance incarnate—a presence that tells them, “Your child is not alone.”

If academia learns to treat connection as a discipline, not an afterthought, it can turn its most intangible quality—trust—into its greatest strength. The choice is clear: either humanise leadership now, or risk losing the humanity we claim to nurture. **IM**



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Leading with impact

People management is one of the most pivotal aspects of organisational leadership, influencing employee engagement, productivity, and overall organisational success. This article explores in-depth strategies and best practices for effective people management, emphasising key concepts such as communication, emotional intelligence, trust-building, and various leadership styles. It also addresses the importance of fostering a positive work environment, giving constructive feedback, and empowering employees. Additionally, the article delves into common challenges faced by people managers, such as handling diverse personalities, addressing performance issues, and managing remote teams. With the growing importance of technological advancements, the article explores how technology can enhance people management while maintaining a human-centered approach. This article offers actionable insights and strategies for managers seeking to improve their leadership skills and create a work environment that fosters growth and success.

What is people management?

People management is the process of managing and leading a team or workforce to help them achieve personal and organisational goals. It includes the activities that involve understanding, guiding, motivating, and empowering employees while maintaining a balance between their well-being and the organisation's objectives. Successful people management is about cultivating an environment in which employees are supported, challenged, and given opportunities for growth.

At its core, people management seeks to ensure that employees have the right tools, guidance, and motivation to perform at their best. This involves managing day-to-day activities as well as long-term development plans. Leaders who excel in people management understand the importance of building rapport, trust, and open communication with their teams.

The role of a people manager analytic

A people manager is tasked with more than just managing tasks; they must lead by example, inspire their teams, and cultivate a culture that supports collaboration, innovation, and personal



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growth. A people manager's role is multi-faceted, involving leadership, mentoring, conflict resolution, and decision-making, often all at once. Effective people managers must develop the ability to balance these responsibilities, as poor management practices can lead to low morale, disengagement, and high turnover rates.

Key principles of people management

- **Communication is key.**

Effective communication is the foundation of successful people management rests. Without open, clear, and consistent communication, a manager cannot fully understand their team's concerns, motivations, or progress. Clear communication helps employees understand expectations, performance metrics, and the company's vision.

In an organisational context, communication needs to be both formal and informal. Regular one-on-one meetings, team discussions, and feedback sessions are essential for gauging employee engagement and addressing concerns. Effective communication is important for building a collaborative work culture that enhances both productivity and employee satisfaction.

Managers should be skilled in non-verbal communication as well, using body language,

facial expressions, and tone of voice to convey empathy and respect. Miscommunication often arises in times of stress or during complex tasks, making it crucial for managers to ensure that messages are both understood and aligned with the goals at hand.

- **Building trust.**

Trust is integral to fostering a productive and harmonious work environment. Employees must feel that their managers are competent, ethical, and genuinely interested in their well-being. Trust-building is a long-term process that is cultivated through consistent behaviour. Trust is not something that can be demanded but must be nurtured through transparency, fairness, and reliability.

Managers can build trust by being consistent in their decisions, keeping promises, and being transparent with their teams. If managers model trustworthiness, employees are more likely to reciprocate and exhibit trust in their leadership. Emotional intelligence is pivotal for establishing trust because it helps managers understand their teams' emotions and respond appropriately.

- **Leading by example.**

A leader who exemplifies integrity, punctuality, work ethic, and respect for

others sets a powerful example for their team. When managers lead by example, they create an atmosphere of mutual respect and inspire employees to exhibit similar behaviour. For instance, a manager who consistently demonstrates a strong work ethic and commitment to team goals encourages the same attitude among team members.

Leadership by example is particularly important in times of crisis or organisational change. During such periods, employees look to their leaders for guidance and stability. By maintaining composure and positive actions, a leader reinforces the behaviour they wish to see in others.

- **Understanding leadership styles.**

Leadership styles directly impact the dynamics of the team and overall effectiveness. A one-size-fits-all approach does not work in leadership; effective managers adapt their leadership styles to suit the situation and the individual team members involved. Leadership styles can range from authoritative (directive and controlling) to democratic (participative and empowering), and the context of the work often dictates which style is most effective. For example, in high-stakes situations requiring quick decision-making, an authoritative leadership style might be more effective. On the other hand, when dealing with a motivated, skilled team, a democratic style that encourages employee input and participation in decision-making might lead to better outcomes.

Essential strategies for effective people management

- **Develop emotional intelligence.**

Emotional Intelligence (EI) is a key skill for effective people management. Managers

with high emotional intelligence are better equipped to handle interpersonal dynamics, manage stress, and resolve conflicts.

Emotional intelligence includes four key components: self-awareness (the ability to recognise and understand one's emotions), self-regulation (the ability to manage one's emotions in healthy ways), social awareness (the ability to understand others' emotions), and relationship management (the ability to build and maintain healthy relationships).

Emotionally intelligent managers can better navigate difficult situations, such as managing conflict or responding to an employee's personal concerns. By developing EI, managers can create a more empathetic, understanding environment where employees feel supported and motivated.

- **Create a positive work environment.**

A positive work environment directly impacts employee performance, morale, and retention. Employees who feel comfortable, valued, and supported are more likely to be productive and stay with the organisation long-term. A positive work environment encompasses physical factors, such as workplace layout, but also the emotional and psychological atmosphere.

Managers can foster a positive environment by promoting work-life balance, providing opportunities for career growth, encouraging open dialogue, and recognising employee achievements. Additionally, workplace culture plays a significant role in shaping employee attitudes and behaviours. Encouraging collaboration, inclusivity, and diversity can create an environment that nurtures innovation and creativity.

Set clear expectations and goals.

Employees need a clear sense of direction to be effective in their roles. Setting clear,

achievable goals helps employees understand how their contributions align with organisational objectives. Managers should regularly track progress against these goals and provide feedback on performance.

Setting expectations also means clarifying roles and responsibilities, ensuring that employees understand what is expected of them, and what they can expect from the organisation. Clear communication of goals and performance metrics prevents misunderstandings and enhances accountability.

- **Provide feedback.**

Feedback is a critical tool for employee development. Feedback should be timely, specific, and framed positively to encourage improvement. Constructive feedback is not just about pointing out what went wrong but also providing guidance on how to improve.

Managers should also encourage employees to provide feedback, not just to leaders but also to peers. This helps build a culture of continuous improvement, where everyone feels empowered to share their thoughts on how to enhance team dynamics, workflows, and performance.

- **Empower employees.**

Empowering employees is about providing them with the autonomy and responsibility to make decisions and take ownership of their work. Empowered employees feel more connected to their work and the organisation's success. Empowerment promotes innovation, enhances job satisfaction, and boosts performance. Managers can empower employees by delegating meaningful tasks, offering opportunities for skill development, and creating a supportive environment where

employees feel their opinions are valued. Empowered employees are more likely to go the extra mile and contribute to the organisation's growth and success.

- **Foster a culture of recognition and appreciation.**

Recognition and appreciation are key to employee motivation. Recognising both individual and team contributions in fostering a culture of success. Recognising achievements, whether through verbal praise, awards, or other incentives, helps employees feel valued and encourages continued performance.

Recognition should be timely and specific, highlighting the exact behaviours and accomplishments that contributed to the success. Creating a culture of appreciation involves recognising the efforts of employees regularly, reinforcing positive behaviours, and showing gratitude for their hard work.

Overcoming common people management challenges

- **Managing different personalities**

People managers must navigate diverse personalities and working styles within their teams. Understanding these differences is essential for fostering a collaborative work environment. Effective managers take time to understand their employees' personalities and tailor their management approach accordingly.

Some employees thrive with autonomy, while others require more guidance and support. Managers should work to identify these preferences and adapt their leadership styles to suit individual needs, helping each employee succeed in their own way.

- **Addressing performance issues**

Handling performance issues requires a

balance of empathy and accountability. Managers should provide timely feedback and have regular discussions about performance. Focusing on improvement rather than blame helps employees grow and stay engaged.

Managers should be transparent about performance expectations and offer practical solutions for overcoming any obstacles. When issues arise, approaching them with a solution-oriented mindset ensures that employees feel supported rather than criticised.

- **Managing remote teams**

With the rise of remote work, managing dispersed teams has become a challenge for many people managers. Effective communication, trust-building, and the right technological tools are essential for remote team management. Managers should leverage video conferencing tools, messaging platforms, and project management software to keep teams connected and engaged.

Regular check-ins and virtual team-building activities are vital to maintaining morale and fostering a sense of belonging. While remote work may lack face-to-face interaction, technology can help bridge the gap and ensure that employees feel supported.

- **Balancing team needs with organisational goals**

The ability to balance the needs of the team with the goals of the organisation is an essential skill for any people manager. Managers must constantly assess how to allocate resources, resolve conflicts, and prioritise tasks to achieve optimal results. Managing competing priorities and ensuring alignment with broader organisational objectives is crucial to long-term success. Successful people managers ensure that

employees understand how their individual work contributes to the organisation's overall mission, aligning personal and professional goals with company objectives.

The future of people management

The future of people management is closely tied to advancements in technology, such as artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning, and data analytics. These technologies will increasingly be used to monitor employee performance, predict potential challenges, and tailor development opportunities. However, while technology can help streamline administrative tasks and provide insights, the human element of people management remains irreplaceable.

Managers must integrate technological tools with empathy, emotional intelligence, and leadership skills to create a more efficient, yet people-centred workplace. The future will likely see a blend of human leadership with data-driven insights to enhance employee experience and organisational effectiveness.

Conclusion

Mastering the art of people management is an ongoing process that requires continuous learning, self-reflection, and adaptation. Effective people managers must develop strong communication skills, emotional intelligence, and a deep understanding of their team's needs and motivations. By employing strategies such as goal-setting, empowerment, feedback, and recognition, managers can create an environment where employees thrive. Overcoming challenges, such as handling diverse personalities, performance issues, and remote teams, requires flexibility and a proactive approach. The future of people management will rely on balancing technology and human leadership skills to ensure the long-term success of individuals and organisations. **IM**



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Illusion or Reality*



Kevin Perlmutter, Chief Strategist and founder of Limbic Brand Evolution, and author, *BRAND DESIRE: Spark Customer Interest Using Emotional Insights* debunks myths that are keeping company and brand leaders on the wrong path and inadvertently limiting the impact of their brand and marketing efforts.

Rethink your brand playbook

MYTH 1: MARKETING SHOULD BE PERSUASIVE.

Are you tired of trying to convince people that your brand, product, or service is for them? It is frustrating when marketing does not seem to be working as well as you'd hope. When you wish more people knew how great your offering is and feel compelled to bring it into their life.

Sometimes the difference between results that are disappointing and results that you're happy with comes from a new perspective and approach.

After many years as a traditional brand strategist, my career took me into work with a behavioural science research company where, together, we created an award-winning neuroscience-based research methodology. From that work, and thanks to my newfound behavioural science mentors, I came to the realisation that traditional brand strategy is broken. It is stuck in the persuasion era—a time when advertising was the primary form of marketing, customer experiences and reviews were few and far between, and choices were much more limited than they are today.

I was suddenly immersed in neuroscientific understanding and details about how our brain

works, including the overwhelming influence that our instinctive emotional reactions have on our conscious behaviour, and the incredibly high correlation between how something makes us feel subconsciously and our conscious desire to have the experience again, or not.

The fact is that instinctive emotional responses play an overwhelming role in customer behaviour, yet traditional brand strategy has historically been geared toward persuasion rather than emotional insights. Most brands are still stuck in the past, focusing on sales tactics, unique selling propositions and proof points that they believe are most important, with superficial insight around what matters most to customers and prospects.

MYTH 2: PEOPLE CARE ABOUT YOUR BRAND'S 'WHY'.

Imagine you are in a networking environment and trying to meet new people—potential customers, perhaps. As you go up to people, you start telling them about you, your company, what you do, and why you are so passionate about it. All because you heard somewhere that people only care about your 'Why'. The unintentional consequence is that there is a high probability that you sound self-

centered, boastful, and irrelevant. You spend all your time talking about your Why, but you don't spend enough time getting to know the person you're trying to connect with, and you have no reliable way to say anything that this person will care about. Meanwhile, the chances of sparking an emotional connection are slipping away.

Despite its popularity, this movement around 'What's our Why?' is yet another factor sending many brand leaders down the wrong path. While it may be a good leadership principle, it's been misused as a brand strategy framework. What's missing? Another equally, if not more important question: 'Who's our Who?' As in, who is our customer and what do they care about? The fact is that 'Why' in the absence of 'Who' is a half-baked brand strategy that's limiting the effectiveness of marketing efforts.

The opportunity you have as a brand leader is to be curious about what matters most to your customers and to discover the 'Shared Emotional Motivation'—something that does not exist in traditional brand strategy. The 'Shared Emotional Motivation' is what both your brand and your customers are most motivated to achieve, individually and with each other. It's the core insight that will help you connect with prospective customers in ways that are highly relevant and emotionally compelling.

MYTH 3: B2B BRANDS SHOULD AVOID EMOTION IN MARKETING.

While it is probably no surprise that emotion plays a role in marketing, some brand leaders, especially in B2B companies are resistant. I have heard, "I don't want our brand to be emotional—we're a serious company."

Unfortunately, brand leaders who feel this way are looking at emotion from an outdated perspective. Emotion is not about your brand expressing emotion. The fact is that the



power of using emotion in branding is less about your brand appealing through humour, sentimentality, or fear tactics. The power is in understanding the emotional motivations of the people who your brand is for and addressing them head on.

Emotional motivations are the driving forces behind our decisions and behaviours. By understanding what drives the decisions and behaviours of your customers and prospective customers, your brand can be more in tune with their needs, wants and desires, so when people encounter it, it feels like it was designed with them in mind.

By flipping your perspective on emotion, your primary brand benefits are rooted in things that are emotionally appealing. You'll be able to create a brand tagline that isn't an 'about us' statement or a category-generic benefit that lacks distinctiveness. You'll be able to create one that is a compelling brand benefit and invitation that draws people into something you've identified they care about.

MYTH 4: COMPANY LEADERS KNOW WHY PEOPLE BUY THEIR BRAND.

In my work with dozens of brand leaders, helping them evolve their brands, I always insist on hearing directly from their customers. You'll never find me creating brand strategy based exclusively on what company insiders want to say. I always include customer research—whether it is a quantitative research study, qualitative interviews with customers, and/or an audit of sentiment analysis across a sizable amount of customer reviews.

Time and time again, my clients are surprised to learn that what the customers care about, why they choose the brand, and

The fact is that customers will only keep coming back to your brand if it continues to fulfill their evolving needs.

why they keep returning is different than what they initially thought. The reasons are always more emotionally

driven than expected. The fact is that according to year-over-year research from Forrester, emotion, or how a brand experience makes people feel, has the most impact on whether people will return to that brand again, or not.

Even in a commoditised business, where other brands offer a very similar offering, your brand can stand apart by delivering an experience that people want to return to. Forrester goes further to say that people want to feel valued, appreciated, and respected, which surprisingly, is more important than surprising and delighting customers.

MYTH 5: CUSTOMERS ARE BRAND LOYAL.

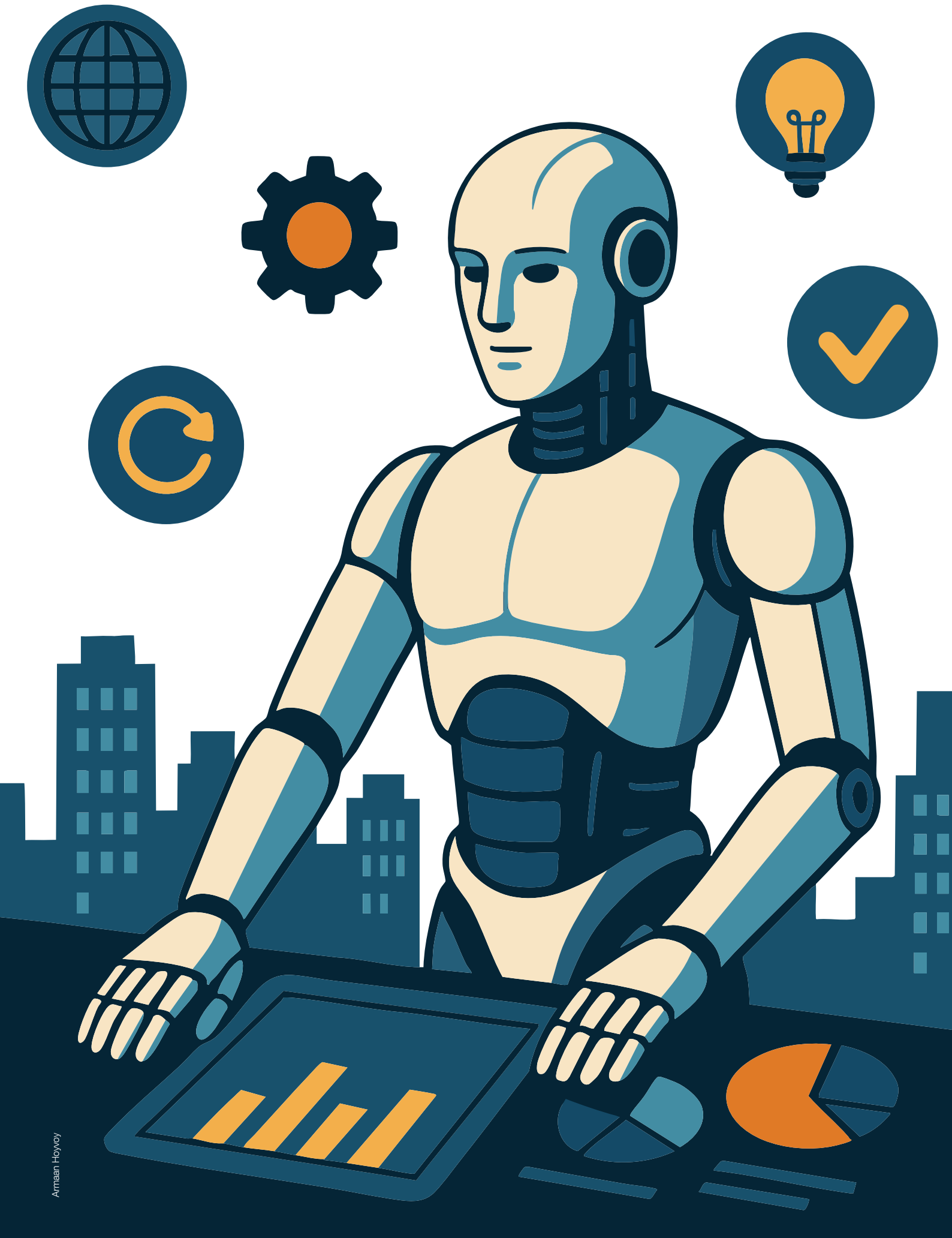
Sometimes brand leaders get overconfident in predictable revenue from existing customers. Meanwhile, customers have an ever-expanding set of choices combined with a low tolerance for unfulfilling brand experiences.

While you may not realize it, many of your customers are returning to your brand out of habit, and the loyalty you believe your brand has is somewhat of an illusion. Scientifically, there is a behavioural distinction between loyalty and habits. Loyalty, by definition, is a conscious choice based on perceived value or—it is when people actively choose and desire your brand. Habits, on the other hand, are more instinctive repeated behaviours that often go unnoticed because they are part of a routine task.

As explained to me by one of my behavioural science mentors, Dr Cyrus H McCandless, PhD, "Don't mistake habit for loyalty; many brand relationships are actually quite fragile. In most cases, we instinctively follow the path of least resistance. Repeat purchases are often just the result of our brain's effort to simplify decision-making versus evaluating choices available in the moment."

The fact is that customers will only keep coming back to your brand if it continues to fulfill their evolving needs. They are more loyal to having their needs met and will actively choose a different brand option if it is available and your brand experience is disappointing or inconvenient. Think of a brand experience that you find frustrating, or that somehow continues to disappoint you. I have no doubt that as soon as you find an alternative, you'll be open to switching. Who would blame you? Nobody should be subjected to a poor brand experience, especially when there are so many choices competing for your attention and business.

As a company and brand leader, your job is to attract and retain customers. Imagine how much easier will you be when you take steps to better understand what drives their decisions and behaviours, so your brand messaging and experiences have a better chance of igniting interest and sparking ongoing desire. **IM**



Bold brainy bots

In the vibrant vortex of India's corporate cosmos, where ambition aligns with ancestral acumen and innovation ignites incessant ascent, Agentic Artificial Intelligence emerges as the indispensable dynamo, the sine qua non reshaping managerial mastery across every functional frontier. Envision autonomous algorithms, not passive processors but proactive protagonists that perceive, plan, and perform with precision, propelling leaders from reactive responders to visionary victors. In a nation where economic engines hum from coastal commerce hubs to silicon strongholds, embracing Agentic Artificial Intelligence is not a luxurious leap; it is the critical cornerstone for sustaining supremacy in a global gauntlet of relentless flux. These intelligent agents, fusing large language models with reinforcement learning architectures, orchestrate operations with elegance akin to a festival of lights, dynamic, dazzling, and decisively deft. Managers navigating India's intricate corporate corridors, weighed by bureaucratic bulk and burgeoning demands, find in Agentic Artificial Intelligence a liberating lifeline, automating arduous audits, forecasting futures, and harmonising human hierarchies with seamless synergy across marketing,

operations, human resources, finance, and strategic spheres. This integration allows for a holistic transformation, where each domain benefits equally from the proactive capabilities of these systems, ensuring that no single area lags behind in the pursuit of efficiency and excellence.

Technically, Agentic Artificial Intelligence weaves a sophisticated tapestry: systems grounded in multi-agent reinforcement learning and transformer-based neural networks exhibit emergent behaviours mirroring managerial intuition. Perception modules ingest voluminous data via convolutional neural networks or recurrent variants like long short-term memory networks, planning engines leverage Monte Carlo Tree Search for probabilistic projections, and execution arms employ actor-critic methods for real-time adaptation.

Across functional domains, these agents deliver disciplined dynamism, enabling managers to address complex challenges with unprecedented accuracy. In marketing, they dissect consumer currents, deploying sentiment analysis through bidirectional encoder representations from transformers embeddings to sift social streams, crafting personalised pitches via recommender systems



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like collaborative filtering, and visualising viral vectors with variational autoencoders. This empowers marketing teams to transform transient trends into targeted triumphs, predicting customer behaviours with granular precision and optimising campaigns to resonate across India's diverse cultural and regional landscapes, where preferences vary from urban sophistication to rural simplicity. Operations benefit from robotic process automation bots bolstered by computer vision for inventory inspections, predictive maintenance powered by autoregressive integrated moving average-augmented time-series forecasting, and supply chain simulations scripted in Python frameworks. Here, managers can streamline sprawling systems into synchronised successes, minimising downtime in manufacturing lines and enhancing logistics efficiency in a country with vast geographical spreads and infrastructural variabilities.

Human resources harness natural language processing to parse talent profiles, predict

performance with propensity score matching, and foster fair frameworks through adversarial training to curb bias, shaping scattered skills into cohesive collectives. In this domain, Agentic Artificial Intelligence facilitates the identification of high-potential employees, designs customised training programs based on individual learning curves, and monitors workforce engagement metrics to preempt burnout or dissatisfaction, all while adhering to India's labour laws and promoting diversity in a multicultural workforce.

Finance leverages fraud detection via anomaly-spotting autoencoders, portfolio optimisation through convex solvers, and compliance checks using knowledge graphs to map regulatory mazes, fortifying fiscal foundations against fluctuating forces. Financial managers gain the ability to conduct real-time risk assessments, automate budgeting processes with predictive algorithms that account for market volatilities, and ensure seamless reporting that complies with

stringent guidelines from financial authorities, thereby safeguarding assets in an economy prone to inflationary pressures and currency shifts. Strategic planning employs agent-based modeling to simulate scenarios, with deep Q-networks distilling data into decisive directives, empowering executives to pivot from peril to prosperity and sculpt short-term steps into sustainable sagas that align with long-term national growth objectives.

In India's multifaceted mosaic, where supply chains span subcontinental sprawl and

The path forward is clear: in an age of artificial intelligence, the most sophisticated technology your organisation can deploy may be the systematic cultivation of human trust

regulatory rigours demand diligent documentation, Agentic Artificial Intelligence ensures synchronised success across domains, adapting to the unique blend of tradition and modernity that defines the corporate environment. Marketing managers, navigating nuanced consumer caprices across diverse demographics,

wield Artificial Intelligence to architect adroit campaigns, predicting preferences with precision and amplifying reach with algorithmic artistry that considers linguistic diversities and regional festivities.

For instance, agents can analyse social media interactions to tailor promotions during festivals like Diwali or Eid, ensuring cultural sensitivity and maximising engagement rates. Operations leaders, tasked with lean logistics in latency-laced landscapes, deploy agents for unmanned utopias, optimising workflows with edge computing to reduce delays and quantum-inspired algorithms to

quicken computational quests, thus handling the complexities of just-in-time deliveries across monsoon-affected routes or congested urban arteries. Human resources, bridging generational gaps from youthful zealots to seasoned specialists, rely on Artificial Intelligence to cultivate competence, curbing churn through predictive analytics that forecast retention risks and fostering inclusive cultures via fairness-aware machine learning that evaluates candidates based on merit rather than background. This approach helps in building resilient teams capable of thriving in India's competitive job market, where talent mobility is high and skill gaps are prevalent.

Financial stewards, steering through currency currents and compliance complexities, employ agents to thwart threats with anomaly detection, streamline audits with automated reconciliation processes, and optimise capital allocation with mathematical might that incorporates economic indicators like gross domestic product growth rates or interest rate fluctuations. In strategy, executives harness Artificial Intelligence to chart course corrections, simulating scenarios with agent-based modelling and leveraging explainable Artificial Intelligence techniques like Shapley Additive Explanations values to ensure transparent, trust-building decisions that can be justified to stakeholders.

These techniques demystify the inner workings of models, allowing managers to understand why certain strategic paths are recommended, such as entering new markets or diversifying product lines in response to global trade dynamics. The technical triumphs are tangible: from monolithic mainframes to microservices meshed with message queues, agents communicate in constellations, enabling scalability that supports India's burgeoning startup ecosystem and established enterprises alike. Edge computing empowers endpoints,



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reducing latency in remote operations, while federated learning fortifies cybersecurity against digital dangers, protecting sensitive data in an era of increasing cyber threats.

Yet, India's unique tapestry demands tailored touches to fully harness Agentic Artificial Intelligence. Multilingual marvels, fine-tuned on diverse linguistic datasets encompassing Hindi, Tamil, Bengali, and other regional languages, ensure equitable engagement across dialects, preventing exclusion in a linguistically rich nation. Regulatory realms require ethical Artificial Intelligence governance, embedding explainable Artificial Intelligence to demystify decisions and align with stringent mandates from bodies overseeing data privacy and financial transparency. In a digital dynamo where unified payment systems and biometric authentication accelerate adoption, managers ignoring Agentic Artificial Intelligence risk obsolescence, outpaced by agile adversaries wielding serverless scalability that allows

for rapid deployment and cost-effective computing. The expansion of broadband and mobile penetration further amplifies this, making Artificial Intelligence accessible even in tier-two and tier-three cities, democratising advanced tools for smaller enterprises.

Challenges persist and must be addressed proactively: cybersecurity specters necessitate neural network hardening through distributed training methods that preserve privacy, data disparities across urban and rural regions demand transfer learning to bridge informational gaps, and ethical enigmas call for equity-focused frameworks that prevent discriminatory outcomes. For example, in human resources, ensuring that algorithms do not perpetuate gender or regional biases requires continuous auditing and refinement. Yet, the payoff pulses across domains, with productivity peaks as repetitive tasks are automated, innovation ignites through data-driven insights that spark new ideas, and competitive edges endure in a global

Agentic Artificial Intelligence, with its autonomous allure and adaptive artistry, stands as the sine qua non across marketing, operations, human resources, finance, and strategy

marketplace where India aims to lead in sectors like information technology and pharmaceuticals.

Marketing sees soaring sales through conversational Artificial Intelligence chatbots using retrieval-augmented generation to provide instant, context-aware

responses to customer queries.

Operations achieve optimised outputs with Artificial Intelligence-driven logistics that predict disruptions from weather patterns or traffic congestions. Human resources fosters flourishing workforces with bias-free hiring processes that leverage machine learning to match skills with roles accurately. Finance secures stability through predictive prowess that anticipates market downturns and adjusts portfolios dynamically. Strategy transforms through data-driven decisions, melding man-machine synergies via human-in-the-loop hybrids that allow managers to intervene and refine Artificial Intelligence outputs, ensuring augmentation enhances rather than replaces human judgment.

The three-letter triumph of Agile, Adaptive, Autonomous defines this evolution, elevating managers from mere monitors to masterful maestros conducting corporate symphonies with silicon sidekicks that amplify their capabilities. Across India's corporate canvas, Agentic Artificial Intelligence's role resonates equally in every domain, creating a balanced ecosystem where marketing innovates customer connections, operations refines resource utilisation, human resources nurtures talent ecosystems, finance safeguards

economic vitality, and strategy envisions future pathways. Managers, steeped in a legacy of self-reliance drawn from historical narratives of independence and entrepreneurial spirit, recognise Artificial Intelligence as the modern mantra for managerial might, transcending mundane tasks to transform organisational trajectories into tales of triumph. The swagger lies in synergy: Artificial Intelligence augments without alienating, amplifying human ingenuity with algorithmic acumen that respects cultural contexts and ethical boundaries.

As India's gross domestic product gallops toward global grandeur, propelled by initiatives in digital transformation and sustainable development, managerial roles without Agentic Artificial Intelligence resemble relics in a renaissance of robotic brilliance, unfit for a future where hyper-connected horizons demand dynamic dexterity and resilient adaptability. The clarion call is clear: integrate or stagnate in the face of evolving challenges. Agentic Artificial Intelligence, with its autonomous allure and adaptive artistry, stands as the sine qua non across marketing, operations, human resources, finance, and strategy, sculpting managers into sovereign strategists unbound by banal burdens and empowered to lead with foresight. In this vibrant vista, victory belongs to those wielding Artificial Intelligence as a warp drive, warping workflows into wonders across every corporate corner, fostering an era of unprecedented growth and global influence.

"In the intricate interplay of India's industrial ascent, Agentic Artificial Intelligence isn't merely a tool—it's the transformative tide that elevates every executive from executor to epoch-maker, ensuring our enterprises endure and excel in eternity's embrace." - Chairman Emeritus, s leading Indian conglomerate. 



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Social commerce unboxed

India is in the midst of a shopping revolution. What was once the domain of traditional brick-and-mortar stores, and later e-commerce websites, is now rapidly being reshaped by social commerce—a hybrid of entertainment, community, and digital convenience.

Shoppers no longer limit themselves to browsing product pages on big online marketplaces. Instead, they discover the latest fashion, gadgets, and beauty products through Instagram Reels, YouTube Shorts, WhatsApp groups, and live streams hosted by influencers and creators. The act of shopping has become social, mobile, and highly interactive.

By late 2024, the Indian social commerce market had already touched US \$7.2 billion, and analysts expect it to grow to US \$8.4 billion in 2025, registering an annual growth rate of about 17 per cent. Longer-term projections are even more ambitious. Some studies forecast that India's social commerce industry could scale to nearly US \$14 billion by 2030, while others predict a leap to US \$54 billion by 2033, underscoring just how fast the model is being embraced. This growth mirrors a global trend. Worldwide, social commerce is already a trillion-dollar market, valued at around US \$1.16 trillion in 2024. By 2033, it is expected

to explode to nearly US \$18 trillion—with Asia leading the charge. India, with its vast smartphone-first population and low-cost internet, has become a fertile ground for this transformation.

The rise of mobile-first shopping

The smartphone is at the heart of this revolution. India has more than 690 million internet users, most of them accessing the web on mobile. For millions in Tier-2 and Tier-3 cities, a phone is not just a communication device—it is their entry point into digital finance, entertainment, and now, shopping. This is why social commerce resonates so strongly. Instead of the impersonal scroll of a catalog, consumers watch a beauty influencer demonstrate a product live, ask questions in real-time, or share recommendations within their WhatsApp family group.

Trust—often the biggest barrier for first-time online buyers—is built through community validation. Payments, once another obstacle, have been radically simplified by UPI (Unified Payments Interface). In 2024 alone, UPI processed an astonishing 88 billion transactions worth ₹119 trillion (about US \$1.38 trillion). Real-time, secure, and nearly universal, UPI has made paying online as simple as sending a text



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message. For social commerce platforms, this has drastically reduced cart abandonment and reassured first-time buyers.

Meesho: India's social commerce giant

If there is one company that exemplifies this shift, it is Meesho. Founded in 2015 as a reseller platform for homemakers and micro-entrepreneurs, Meesho has grown into a juggernaut. In just the first nine months of FY24, the platform recorded 1.3 billion orders from more than 187 million annual transacting users. Meesho's edge lies in how it harnesses content as commerce.

The platform has built an ecosystem around

Surveys suggest that 75 per cent of Gen Z buyers admit to being influenced by trending content before making a purchase. They are also more inclined toward sustainable, quirky, and affordable products

creators and influencers, who bring products to life through videos, demos, and live streams. Its Meesho Creator Club, Video Finds, and Live Shop initiatives alone connected with 14.5 million users in 2024. More than 21,000 creators now actively generate content that

fuels sales. For Gen Z, which makes up roughly a third of Meesho's user base, this content-driven model feels natural. These digital natives are more likely to purchase products they see in viral reels or trending videos.

In fact, surveys suggest that 75 per cent of Gen Z buyers admit to being influenced by trending content before making a purchase. They are also more inclined toward sustainable, quirky, and affordable products—perfectly aligned with Meesho's catalog. Technology underpins this growth. Meesho's AI-powered voice bot handles about 60,000 calls daily, resolving queries without human intervention

and improving customer satisfaction by 10 per cent.

Meanwhile, its fraud-prevention program, Project Vishwas, blocked over 22 million suspicious transactions in 2024 alone. Even logistics have been reimaged. Meesho's new marketplace, Valmo, connects orders to thousands of delivery partners across 15,000 pincodes, ensuring speed and efficiency. Together, these innovations make Meesho not just a shopping platform but a full-stack ecosystem.

Shopsy and the vernacular edge

Another major player is Shopsy, Flipkart's social commerce arm. With more than 200 million app downloads, Shopsy has carved a niche by focusing on smaller towns and vernacular languages. About 68 per cent of its users come from outside India's metros. The app leverages community-based WhatsApp selling, where sellers share product catalogs in local languages and build personal trust with buyers. This model caters perfectly to India's linguistic diversity and highlights how social commerce is not just about flashy videos but also about accessibility and trust.

A marketplace powered by influencers

If e-commerce is driven by discounts, social commerce thrives on influence and aspiration. According to Meesho's E-commerce Festive Forecast 2024, half of shoppers clicked on influencer links during the festive season, 70 per cent followed influencers for reviews, and 40 per cent admitted to buying products because of FOMO—fear of missing out. This explains why brands from Nike's 'Just Do It' to Dove's 'Real Beauty' are tailoring campaigns that go beyond mere transactions, creating emotional connections instead. Indian campaigns like Meesho's 'MyStoreMyStory' are doing the same, empowering sellers to narrate personal journeys



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Social commerce, with its emphasis on immediacy and engagement, dovetails neatly with these expectations

commerce—the promise of groceries or essentials delivered in under 30 minutes—is also shaping consumer expectations. Indians spent nearly ₹64,000 crore (US \$8 billion) on quick commerce in FY25, and this figure could triple to ₹2 lakh crore (US \$24 billion) by FY28. Though profitability remains a challenge, platforms like Blinkit and Instamart are conditioning shoppers to expect speed, convenience, and trust. Social commerce, with its emphasis on immediacy and engagement, dovetails neatly with these expectations.

Regional and category insights

Interestingly, Western and Central India, particularly Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh, are leading in adoption. Stronger internet infrastructure and better supply chains have given these regions an edge. As for categories, apparel and beauty dominate, driven by influencer reviews, styling tips, and live demos. Beauty tutorials on Instagram or lipstick try-ons on YouTube Shorts often translate directly into sales. Globally too, personal care and beauty are the largest drivers of social commerce.

Challenges on the road ahead

Despite its meteoric rise, social commerce in India faces significant hurdles. Startups are grappling with soaring customer acquisition costs, which erode already thin margins. The threat of fraudulent and counterfeit goods continues to test trust, demanding stronger verification systems. Competition is also heating up, with giants like Amazon and Flipkart rolling

that resonate with buyers.

Beyond E-commerce: The quick commerce factor

The rise of quick

commerce—out their own social shopping features. On top of this, looming data privacy regulations could reshape how platforms operate. Yet optimism prevails. Investors, including Bessemer Venture Partners, remain bullish, viewing India's digital economy as a potential US \$1 trillion opportunity driven by content, commerce, and technology.

The road to a \$1 economy

What makes India's story unique is how multiple strands—affordable mobile phone data, widespread UPI adoption, a booming creator economy, and the aspirations of a young, smartphone-savvy population—are converging. Together, they are creating an ecosystem where shopping is no longer a chore but an experience woven into daily digital life.

The next few years will likely blur the boundaries further. Imagine a world where a viral Instagram reel leads to a purchase within seconds, payment happens instantly through UPI, and the item arrives at your doorstep in under an hour via quick commerce. That future is already taking shape in India. Social commerce is not just another retail channel—it is fast becoming the beating heart of India's digital economy. By blending trust, entertainment, and technology, it promises to redefine how a billion Indians shop in the years to come. **M**

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The rare Earth elements fiasco

I think it was in April or May 2025 when Maruti-Suzuki pushed the panic button for a likely cutback in production of one of their popular models due to shortage of rare earth magnets. Not a day has passed since then without the issue hitting our mainline dailies. It is a situation similar to someone waking up from a long slumber and realising that he had forgotten something very important! it's a familiar story in our country and a problem that requires immediate redressal. Yet another task for the government and our brilliant corporate managers.

I was curious to understand the importance of these - hitherto not widely known - materials and also the way forward as China continues to 'ration' out the same. After reaching out to some scientist/techie friends in USA and browsing through mounds of information on the web, I decided to share a simple & cogent story with your eminent readers who are bound to find quick solutions to this blackmail by our northern neighbour. But, before that some basic information about the REEs - their genesis, availability and importance. Meantime the mayhem continues—albiet not too badly

now - that threatens to seriously hurt not only our thriving automobiles industry but several other sectors too.

Following the Maruti-Suzuki outcry our alert Commerce Minister Mr. Piyush Goyal promptly assured everyone that “the government is in talks with China” and also urged for *atmanirbharta*. Indeed, there are possibilities of ‘self-reliance’ in this present monopoly of China but, let me first finish sharing some data about the REEs.

A group of 17 elements on the periodic table—atomic weights between 57 to 73/74—possessing properties like high magnetic strength, luminescence, high melting temperature and catalytic nature—are known as ‘rare earth elements’ (REEs) that find application in virtually every electronic product like smartphones, laptops, tablets etc., essentially to ensure their compact size (miniaturisation) allowing manufacturers to design thinner and lighter devices without sacrificing performance. REEs also find use in display screens, speakers, batteries and other gadgets. They help increase energy efficiency and extend battery life. EVs and other green power products like wind turbines too find increasing use for REEs; as do aircraft

engines. As an aside—and to make the gold obsessed Indian ladies happier—precious metals like gold (79) and platinum (78) have higher atomic weight and so, are presumably rarer and superior!

Globally, there are reserves of around 130 million tonnes of raw REEs, out of which China is sitting on nearly 45MT. Others with sizable reserves are Brazil (21MT), INDIA

The values of accepting no limitations, alternative thinking, and driving change in the 'Rise' manifesto were also a set of cultural values matching the needs of a decentralised organisation and management structure

(7), Australia (6), and Russia (4); Vietnam, USA and Greenland too have the blessed stuff and Sweden has just discovered about 1 MT. The problem is however not with 'reserves' but mining, separation and finally production to make these 'ready for use'.

Predictably China—forever the leader in such matters—produced 3,90,000 MT in 2024 with hardly anything to report from anyone else. Due to intrinsic difficulties in production—including the crucial fact that the ores are often mixed with radioactive thorium and uranium and the dangerous waste can get into ground water and streams posing grave dangers—even China's production has been metred. From 1,00,000 MT ten years ago, it was raised to 2,00,000 MT in 2019 and (this is when the pace increased) 3,76,000 in 2023. Sometime in April '25 the Chinese government mandated that all exporters of REEs will send out consignments only after the government issues a license. At some stage, the Chinese

government stopped local production and started looking at outsourcing from Myanmar by taking on lease vast tracts rich in these ores. All this time - despite our decent reserves and rapidly increasing usage—we remained blissfully somnolent. To the best of my knowledge, we made no move to mine and produce our own stuff! Grim reminder of the familiar story with photo-voltaic and semi-conductors—indeed several other items—when import was cheaper and without hassles. China throttling the supply chain may not be a bullying technique; they were probably just being smart negotiators, perhaps in response to Trumps tariffs or to put pressure on India.

And, then there was a serious crunch.

New applications for REEs continue to emerge—quantum computing, advanced medical imaging, more efficient energy storage systems etc. R&D is focusing on recycling and recovery of REEs from electronic waste. I presume, here's another area to find a balance between innovations and sustainable practices. Guess we can also find new materials which may be abundant and easier to mine/process etc.

'Necessity is the Mother of Invention' is a clichéd phrase that almost always holds good. An expert with the TOI group recalls Homi Bhabha seeking to extract power from the sands along our vast coastline during the 1940s and '50s. In the cold war era, he had the foresight to switch from uranium to thorium (which we have in abundance) for our nuclear energy programme. Hunt for thorium also led to identifying monazite - of which we have reserves of nearly 12 million tonnes in Kerala, Odisha and Tamil Nadu. One of the leading private sector companies in auto components—among the biggest importers of REEs—has already identified magnets made from the monazite group



which are more versatile, less brittle and just 10-15 per cent weaker. He also recalls that, in 2010, when Japan had a spat with China, the Japanese collaborated with our PSU Indian Rare Earths Ltd (IREL) and started their magnet manufacturing. Time for IREL to rise to the occasion again. Given a chance, and some funding, to innovate, some of our start-ups may well solve the problem over the next few years. 'Rare Earths may not really be so rare!

Meantime, our savvy diplomats and negotiators have worked their charm on our 'I-hate-you, I-love-you' neighbour. Chinese are also unlikely to deprive actual users, which could push other countries to hurry up with their own efforts to produce REEs. Actually we have already seen some thaw in the Chinese approach. With easing of Indian controls on visas, direct flights and JVs with Chinese companies. What is really heartening is the recent clearance to Dixon's tie-up

with a Chinese company where Dixon holds majority shareholding.

Some lessons from the story

All of us involved with 'supply chain management' must learn to anticipate and carefully watch possible moves of our supplier, especially when it is a single source & an item of critical importance. We had known for years, rather decades, that REEs are coming from just one source—China—and, in fact, this country was the only source for the whole world—barring Japan.

We could also see our consumption increasing rapidly, we were well aware of our own fairly large deposits; we had a functional PSU for the job, had even helped Japan set up their domestic processing and yet we did nothing to get into the act! No one in the industry or the government put up a red flag. All because import was a lot easier! **IM**



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