

'Flipkart happened as Google rejected me'

Challenge Is To Get Wife To Buy Groceries From Flipkart, Not BigBasket: Binny Bansal

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Bengaluru: "How did Flipkart come into existence? Because Google rejected me twice," said Binny Bansal.

The co-founder of Flipkart, in a free-wheeling chat on Thursday at SAP Labs India's launch of its second accelerator programme, spoke on topics rarely touched, joked with the audience and gave colourful anecdotes about the company he built. After IIT-Delhi, Binny had worked in Sarnoff Corp, a company doing R&D in vision technologies. Between 2005 and 2006, he applied twice to Google for technology roles and was rejected both times. "I was always interested in technology and had a wonderful run in Sarnoff. I thought Google might be a great fit." In 2006, Sachin Bansal, who became his Flipkart co-founder later, got Binny into Amazon as a senior software engineer.

One of his key challenges today, Binny said, is to convince his wife to purchase fruits and vegetables from Flipkart instead of BigBasket. "So everyday, she goes online and buys off BigBasket and I try convincing her about our site. Hey, maybe you should try out some of our new features... But no, I still haven't been able to convince her." Binny spoke about his bonding with Sachin. "One of the stories that cracks us up is how Sachin was the one who referred me to Amazon and got a big fat bonus. And it gets funnier, because eight months later I quit. And Sachin had to cough up the money to pay back Amazon." The referral bonus programme mandated that the referred employee must stay in the company for a certain minimum period.

The audience was in splits when Binny spoke about some

unexpected consequences during their Big Billion Day sales, when Sachin and he would do some door-to-door deliveries to understand customers better. "Some people don't recognise us and the conversation is casual. Others do, and take photographs. But there was one customer who just wouldn't let me go. And not just

former hostel mates when I came to Bangalore, till we all moved on or got married," he said.

Binny said in his initial years he was more keen on tech and took courses on augmented reality and machine learning. "Many of my friends were getting placed in Capital One, McKinsey. I got an offer letter from DE Shaw (invest-

RELIVING EARLY DAYS

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BINNY BANSAL |
FLIPKART CO-FOUNDER

him, but his entire family was keen on stuffing me. So I got plied with chai, mithai; more chai and mithai. And since customer is king, can't say 'No'," he said.

About his early life and schooling, Binny said it was a surprise to him that he being a person passionate about sports and just okay in studies, went on to join IIT. He said the years in IIT-Delhi still remain some of the best years of his life. "IIT-Delhi has a unique hostel culture. You were more loyal to your hostel than your department, course or batchmates. The rivalry between the different hostels was intense and played out during sporting events, cultural shows. There would be sloganeering, cheering and anti-cheering; more anti-cheering than anything. I was in Shivalik hostel and the bonds I forged there carried over later on in life. I ended up staying with 6-7 of my

ment firm). But I wanted to do something different and so came to Bangalore and worked for a tech company (Sarnoff). It was a great place and I was learning a lot. But their applications were not ready for the market. I didn't see a future for myself there, so I quit."

Asked how he got the courage to launch a startup, Binny agreed that it had been very comforting to take a regular salary home at an MNC. "But I was getting bored. I wanted something different. I was 24, I could take risks. I was very frugal then and did the math. I wanted to be able to last 18-24 months without a regular income. I saved Rs 4-5 lakh to start the journey. We were bootstrapped those first two-and-a-half years and I was confident. If it failed I could always go back to a tech company. My skills were not going to go away."