

The Ahmedabad Applique Cluster: Harness the Power of Traditional Values

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ABSTRACT

The case study was undertaken with the objective to explore the marketing practices adopted by a craft cluster located in Ahmedabad which practices the traditional and age-old art of applique work. The main activities of this cluster are coordinated by the Chauhan family who have been involved into applique work since four generations. The case explores the functioning and success of this cluster from the marketing perspective. It was an interesting finding that without the use of any formalised marketing approach and modern technology, the cluster was demonstrating admirable performance through its prudent and purposeful approach. The key to this success was portrayal of traditional values and family knowledge in business activities. The focus of the cluster was customer satisfaction, proficient system and sustainability concern.

Keyword: Applique, Marketing, Traditional Values, Customer Orientation, Sustainability, Proficiency

INTRODUCTION

The business world has been witnessing a gamut of marketing practices since the emergence of the concepts of trade and selling. There are marketing practices that have been called 'traditional' due to their commonplace and staid approaches. On the other side of the continuum there are 'innovative' marketing practices adopted by modern retailers using internet and digital technology and addressing specific and 'emerging' issues related to consumers' demographic and psychographic profiles. Various new dimensions have been attached to the concept of marketing, for instance, 'emotional marketing', 'social marketing', 'social media marketing', 'lifestyle marketing', 'green marketing', 'digital marketing' 'relationship marketing', 'Internet marketing' and so forth.

The present case study was undertaken with the objective to explore the marketing practices adopted by a craft cluster located in Ahmedabad which practices the traditional and age-old art of applique work. Craft sector was chosen for the current study as it comprises a segment of producers

and/ or marketers who generally remain separated from the mainstream commercial marketing. The attempt was to explore the concepts and practices that artisans implement in their marketing activities.

Although many craft clusters, practicing applique work, exist in Gujarat, the current study took the Chauhan family as the subject due to the repute that this family had earned for their intricate and innovative applique work and the strong bonding that they were known to have with their customers (both retailers as well as end-consumers).

THE AHMEDABAD APPLIQUE CLUSTER AND THE CHAUHAN FAMILY

The Chauhan family had been living in the Jivrajpark area of Ahmedabad city in Gujarat for more than forty years now. The family was currently headed by Hirabhai Chauhan, a master artisan in the field of applique craft. He had been a national award winner for his excellent applique work on quilts. Hirabhai's wife and his four sons were actively and dedicatedly involved in applique work since

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a time that even Hirabhai could not recall. This was the work in which the entire family had remained engrossed into, almost 'always'. According to him, appliqué work had been everything for the family since four generations. The Chauhan family had been able to associate various smaller applique artisans majorly in Ahmedabad and some in Vadodara and Rajkot in Gujarat and organised the association to form a cluster. It was now a network of almost 1500 artisans, comprising of approximately 1000 women from local communities, providing regular livelihood, especially to the rural artisans who had no other source of income. The coordination centre for the clusters activities lied in Ahmedabad and the Chauhans had voluntarily taken up the coordination work.

The literal meaning of 'applique' is 'to apply' or 'to 'put on'. Applique, a textile craft in which one piece of fabric is sewn over another for producing decorative effect, has been practiced in India since ages in the states of Gujarat, Punjab, Rajasthan, Orissa, and Bihar. Appliqué is created by two different techniques and its origin could be identified by the style of fabrication, composition, colour usage and patterns created. The simple appliqué is created by cutting fabric in any desired form or shape and then stitching it on the surface of the textile product. Symmetrical and asymmetrical abstract forms are created in varied shapes and sizes. Quite often the appliqué technique is accompanied by range of stitches adding more value and further embellishing it. Another method is known by the name of 'reverse appliqué' in which the surface fabric forms the shape and design contrasted to the top fabric in appliqué.

Applique is used to make a range of products which majorly include fashion, home furnishings and home décor products. Although, the Chauhans come up with exquisite pieces of applique craft, their 'white on white' applique was much appreciated all over the world and appealed to a large sector of people with taste for subtlety. Their highest selling products include godadis (quilts), cushions, bags, pouches, bedspreads, cushion covers, and wall hangings. Some other specialised products which they manufacture included wedding mask veil, torans (ornamentation for entrance of the house), door hangings, lampshades, bullock cart covers, camel saddles, kurtas, and other apparel products.

The Ahmedabad applique cluster, majorly coordinated by the Chauhan family, is one of the most well-established

and reputed craft clusters of Gujarat. The India-Pakistan partition made Hirabhai Chauhan migrate to Jamnagar in Gujarat, India in 1946. Similarly, there were other families who shifted and started earning through tailoring work. The ancient craft of applique work taught by their forefathers, proved a big saviour at this time of turbulence. The women-folk, in order to utilise their free time, used the waste trimmings and fabric left-overs from tailor shop, to make applique products such as chandavos (marriage decorations), godaris, torans, and other beautification items for their cattle and homes. These products were supplied to retailers in local market. But as there was not much business in the small town of Jamnagar, Hirabhai and some other artisans moved to Ahmedabad with their families. They associated together and started the applique work in Ahmedabad. The year of 1978 brought a major change for the Chauhans when Gujarat State Handicrafts and Handloom Development Corporation (GSHHDC), a unit of Government of Gujarat gave the Chauhans a big order for replicating the textile collection in their museum. The family was selected for this order by this prime government establishment due to the excellent reviews from the local market for the applique work done by them and their prompt and proficient way of functioning. After the successful completion of the order, there was no looking back for the Chauhan family. Brands and retailers like Gurjari (the retail outlet managed by GSHHDC), Fabindia, Sanskruti, Cottage Emporium, and BG Handicrafts placed orders of applique products with the Chauhans and the work was distributed amongst the cluster artisans according to appropriateness of their skills and expertise. The applique products made by this cluster started getting exhibited and sold in Ahmedabad Haat, Delhi Haat, Kutchch Rann Utsav, and various other handicraft & handloom fairs and exhibitions in Gujarat, Delhi, Hyderabad, and Mumbai. Through these exhibitions and support of GSHHDC, the products also got a platform for export in Australia, U.K, Germany and Austria.

Very obviously the design sensibility, the creativity, the technique of delicate and intricate work, the patience required to complete the entire piece of fabric or textile that gets completed in days or even months, was all very natural and spontaneous in the Chauhan family. The innovative and nearly impeccable art work was bringing accolades to the cluster but sustenance in the competitive market where numerous nationally and internationally established players existed with contemporary product offerings, modish fabric and surface ornamentation

techniques, was a challenge. The question that required answering was “How was the cluster communicating with its customers to understand their requirements and market its products efficiently to national and international customer to achieve the sales target?”

Hirabhai and his two elder sons, Jayeshbhai and Pragneshbhai, were approached to uncover the marketing dimensions of the cluster. The family representatives instantly responded that they do not consciously make or implement any formal marketing plan or technique in their business. But the approach and the practices mentioned by them could be very well related to the formalised framework of marketing concepts and theories. The cluster had a fairly simple functioning. There was transparency and truthfulness in the system. People trusted each other, had healthy communication and dutifully completed whatever task was assigned to them. Use of technology and digital media was almost negligible, except the communication on mobile phone. There was absolutely no use of advertising and promotional techniques or digital media and internet technology, or modern marketing concepts by this applique cluster. Despite all this, they were able to sustain the competition with other applique clusters and not only maintain a reputable position but also contribute meaningfully in keeping a traditional craft ‘live and healthy’ in an environment where similar products and cheap replicas were being made using modern machinery and techniques; and also when other highly fashionable, contemporary, and more durable articles were available in abundant.

The two-fold strategy adopted by this applique craft cluster was simple but highly effective – “understand customer requirement” and “always meet deadlines”. These were two promises that every artisan in the cluster had to make and fulfil. In order to understand their customers they emphasized on getting maximum details of the customer requirements and specifications. Whenever possible the master craftsman interacted directly with the customer. However, this did not ensure that all the products made were always 100 percent error-free. Being a hand technique, there were variations, as sometimes the same symmetry and accuracy (that is possible in machine work) may not be obtained for all the hand-crafted pieces. Also, another challenge was that sometimes an artisan worked on an artwork with such attachment and innate sense of creativity that his/her artwork started reflecting something else from what the customer has asked; after all artists

have their own sensibility and reflect it through their own imagination, mood and creativity. Interestingly, the customer relationship building was so strong and positive that even when there were some defects or variations in design, technique, fabric or colour, the customers were not annoyed and accepted the products. The cluster experienced almost zero customer attrition.

Direct transactions and face-to-face interactions with customers took place during exhibitions and fairs, and when customers visited the Chauhan’s workshop-cum-residence in Jivrajpark in Ahmedabad. The Chauhan family member interacting with the customers made sure to record customer specifications and feedback in a register specially maintained for this purpose. It was emphasized by Hirabhai that during communication with customer at all times, the exhibitor or artisan must be courteous and informative. According to Hirabhai, the first phase of customer interaction is very important in life-long relationship building. Indirect transactions took place in the government-run and private retail stores. In this format also, the Chauhan family members ensured to collect customer feedback from the retailer during their regular visits to the outlet to know the stock performance and modifications required both in number and in styles.

Once orders were received, meticulous follow up was maintained with suppliers of raw material so that timely delivery of the finished product could be done along with maintaining all the specifications. When asked from Hirabhai as to how he learns to deal with customers in this remarkable manner and ensure smooth functioning of his business, he listened and smiled. His answer was that he had never even been to school. All that he practices in business is a reflection of the Indian family traditions, culture and values where utmost care is taken of the guests that come to visit them. In the Chauhan family business, customers are treated as guests. Annoyed guests bring a bad name for the family; similarly annoyed customers bring bad name to business. For him it was this simple philosophy of “*Atithi Devo Bhava*” (meaning “Guest is God”) that was important for everyone in the cluster to follow, and rest everything fell into place by itself. Customers were not only happy but delighted. They developed a sense of attachment with the cluster.

It was surprising to note that none of the Chauhan family members held a formal degree in management, in fact most of the family members had completed only basic school education only, yet they understood the

importance of creating positive experiences for their customers. The cluster’s activities were not being guided by any management philosophy or theory, even then the marketing elements that they were using in their business functioning could be clearly mapped to the contemporary

marketing principles that are the support pillars for success of established national and international players in the market. Fig. 1 illustrates the marketing elements of the Ahmedabad applique cluster categorised under three heads- customer orientation, proficient system, and sustainability concern.

<i>Customer orientation</i>	<i>Proficient system</i>	<i>Sustainability concern</i>
• Customer satisfaction	• Skill set accomplished	• Reuse
• Customer connectedness	• Creative compositions	• Refurbishing
• Customer relationship	• Design sensibility	• Natural material
• Customer communication	• Social connectedness	• Social support
• Customer engagement	• Regular innovation	• Social benefit
• Customisation	• Supplier relationship	• Community development
• Mechanism of feedback	• Transparency	
• Treating customer as guest	• Truthfulness	
• Creating value for the customer	• Flexibility	
• Creating positive customer experiences		

Fig. 1: Marketing Elements of the Ahmedabad Applique Cluster

Customer orientation

Customer orientation is perhaps the most common marketing philosophy used in contemporary marketing. Creating values for the customer was the unique element of the applique cluster that was helping in creating a satisfied and loyal customer base. The members of the cluster who were considered to have good communication skills were assigned the task of dealing directly with customers. In the Chauhan family, Hirabhai’s elder sons, Jayeshbhai and Pragneshbhai were given this responsibility as they could deal with customers well, understood their requirement and articulated the same to the artisans working on the order. At most times, according to the requirement and the possibility, customers were involved in the conceptualisation of product and its features, and also during the different stages of the product design and manufacturing. It had always been an effort to provide maximum customisation to the customers. Till the order got completed and delivered regular contact was maintained with customers to avoid any deviations from the specifications. Customer feedback on the completed orders was taken personally by Hirabhai or his elder sons and was documented properly.

A robust sourcing network was maintained to ensure that material was sourced according to customers’

specifications and the order was completed on time. Hirabhai’s younger sons, Kartikbhai and Manojbhai generally dealt with the material suppliers and coordinated with the artisans. Recently, Jayeshbhai and Pragneshbhai have started using “WhatsApp” application to communicate with their customers and suppliers and share data and product images.

Proficient System

The cluster upheld the community traditions and practices but at the same time had been flexible enough to embrace modifications without disrupting the aesthetic sensibility and traditional essence of the art work. These changes got reflected through use of a new colour scheme, experimenting with a new fabric or creating a new product category. There was a conscious effort to provide customisation to the maximum possible level.

Taking customer feedback and its incorporation in the work had been a regular feature of the cluster’s work approach. This was specially emphasized in the cluster. The scheduling of tasks was not done through project scheduling techniques; it was the experience and knowledge that got transferred from generation to generation. The cluster believed in focusing on

providing just the core product and the true value to its customers. Information and awareness about their work got disseminated through existing customers and positive word-of-mouth.

The entire set of operations was managed without the use of computing technology, or internet and digital media. Jayeshbhai took an initiative to form an NGO, named Lok Seva Adikar Mandal in 1983. The Office of Development Commissioner (Handicraft) Government of India, Ministry of Textiles had been providing financial assistance to this NGO through various schemes right from its beginning. Such schemes supported artisans by skill upgradation workshop, procuring quality raw material, organising exhibition cum sales and providing financial assistance to artisans for the artwork. Recently, Jayeshbhai took a step further and gave the NGO an online presence at www.lokadhikarsevamanch.org. The website was very simple and contains basic information but helped in providing contact details to national and international buyers of applique products.

Sustainability Concern

The cluster upheld both, social and environmental sustainability. Mostly cotton fabric was used to make the products. The sewing thread and trims (laces and other embellishment) used were also made of cotton. The material was dyed naturally using natural colours and vegetable dyes. There was absolutely no usage of machinery or electricity in the manufacturing process except the use of iron for ironing of finished products. Thus, the raw material and its processing were entirely environmental friendly. The concept of 'reuse' getting popular in the western world had been used by the applique cluster since many decades. Fabric waste was used innovatively and intelligently to create beautiful patterns and surfaces by the cluster artisans. The applique technique was also enabling refurbishing of old and torn garments in order to make them wearable by mending them or giving them a fresh look.

Social commitment was the element on which the foundation of the cluster had been laid. The concept of social welfare, community development, upliftment of artisans and maintaining regular livelihood opportunities for artisan families was paramount. Transparency was maintained throughout the sourcing network. Fair trade practices were followed and fair system of wages and

profit sharing was practiced.

Modern day consumers are conscious of the sustainability concerns and feel a sense of pride and responsibility in getting connected to eco-friendly and socially-committed brands and retailers. The demand of environmental-friendly and socially sustainable products is increasing. The proactive approach towards environmental- and social-responsibility was providing the products of the applique cluster a respectable image and was increasing their demand in national and international markets.

Amalgamation of all the above discussed aspects of the Ahmedabad Applique cluster has actually taken the form of a marketing model, which was spontaneously implemented by the cluster in its functioning and which was providing it a unique competitive advantage.

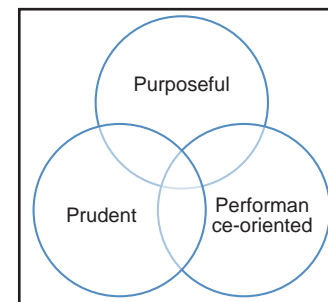


Fig. 2: The Marketing Model of Ahmedabad Applique Cluster

The Ahmedabad applique cluster witnessed an innate sensibility of the artisans to integrate the elements of the marketing plan in the way they carry out the clusters activities and naturally contribute in up-keeping the 3-pronged marketing model, given in Fig. 2. This model can be described as:

- i) **Purposeful:** The cluster is working for very noble causes of environmental restitution and social commitment. It does not only address environmental issues but also contributes meaningfully and impressively to social development.
- ii) **Prudent:** The cluster has a practical approach driven by common sense. It is based on traditional, but time-tested values. The business is backed by good judgement supported by family knowledge.
- iii) **Performance-oriented:** The key factor that drives growth and success of this cluster is the promise of maintaining performance standards as per speci-

fications given by customers, whether in form of quality of products or the delivery time.

CONCLUSION

The Ahmedabad applique cluster is thriving well. There is lot of competition from established players in the market. The market is flooded with fake replicas of applique work, cheaper machine made versions of the art work and other fancier and more durable products in the same product category. But applique work is holding a reputable position in the market. The contribution of the Ahmedabad applique cluster and specially the Chauhan family, in upholding this craft cannot be ignored and is worth many accolades.

The marketing practices adopted by the cluster cannot be described through any one marketing model. It is not a holistic marketing model, but is successful and effective in its own way. From the four components of the holistic marketing model, namely, relationship marketing, internal marketing, integrated marketing, and socially responsive marketing, the Ahmedabad applique cluster has incorporated two components in its functioning i.e., relationship marketing and socially responsive marketing. The model is neither purely green marketing nor completely experiential marketing. It is not also completely a personalised marketing model. But it is functional and is able to meet its objectives very respectfully.

It is a marketing model that draws upon family values and traditions to build a competitive advantage and attain

social, environmental and economic success. Modern marketing concepts, generally being drawn from the western world are actually comprehended and implemented in a very traditional 'Indian' manner which Indians learn as part of their growing up and socialisation processes. The marketing approach practiced by this cluster is natural, innate and unlearned, yet so much relating to the modern theories and concepts of marketing. The case gives a very strong message of working uniquely in the way that suits the business, keeping business objectives in focus.

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