

Organisational Agility and 7Ps of the marketing mix for the post-COVID-19 period: A case study of the Indian informal food sector

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Abstract

This study uncovers the reality of the COVID-19 epidemic, acting as a significant hurdle for small restaurants' sustainability. The study used a purely qualitative methodology dealing with data collected from the industry to frame effective sustainability strategies to revamp the business. Hence, in-depth interviews to capture the real problems faced by restaurants were conducted. From the study, we understood that big cities such as Chennai, Bengaluru and Thiruvananthapuram took initiatives in the post-COVID-19 crisis to bring about changes in the business process, giving importance to online ordering and delivery, new cuisines and more hygienic transparency. Small cities such as Coimbatore, Thiruvalla and Kochi are still confident of running their businesses, but there may not be a drastic change in the process. However, their expectations of help from the government are high. Three major factors are being considered to be cornerstone elements, which are health, cleanliness and hygiene. In this research, the scope is limited only to restaurants in big and small cities, while large-sized star category hotels have not been considered.

Keywords: Informal food sector, Organisational agility, Marketing mix elements, COVID-19

Introduction

COVID-19 is a global health disaster, affecting 213 countries, with the death rate increasing to unexpected levels (Worldometers, 2020). Most countries' governments have laid down strict laws that have been immediately implemented to reduce the virus's spread (Hamzelou, 2020) (The Lancet, 2020). Everyday human activities have been disrupted due to the lockdown, which has been extended for several weeks and has left a negative impact on supply, manufacturing, consumption and job opportunities. (Nicola et al., 2020). COVID-19 drove many poor migrant workers to their hometowns, which leaves a black mark in Indian history, with justice denied for migrants who have lost their lives. Most employees in small restaurants are internal migrants from other states. Their return post-COVID-19 is uncertain so that most small restaurants would suffer

from a lack of employees (The Lancet, 2020)(Bhopal, 2020), (Brandenberger, Baauw, Kruse, & Ritz, 2020).

Few in the hospitality industry have given accommodation for internal migrant workers or provided them with bare subsistence. In developing nations like India, the informal food sector is the worst affected. This sector has grown in leaps and bounds due to the lack of employment opportunities in the formal sector and migration to urban areas due to reduced farming. The farmers have either sold their agricultural land due to crises or have lost their lands for some developmental projects. They end up working in the informal sector. This sector primarily comprises food processing and distribution. A large section of the population is engaged in processing and selling food, thus providing livelihood to many. Despite its economic contribution, the informal food sector, unfortunately, does not appear in the national accounts of the Country (Yasmeen, 2001). The everyday food sector comprises food production, distribution and catering services as well. As they are not included in the national records, they are usually excluded from development policies.

Nevertheless, this sector works with huge constraints. Firstly, they do not have proper storage facilities. It must be noted that they deal with inventories that have a low shelf life. This makes them more vulnerable to any minor changes that occur in the economy. The pandemic has created massive uncertainty in small restaurants, joints or eateries that are an integral part of this sector. Various agents provide integrated services to make the entire process seamless, without any disruption or failure, right from the purchase of raw materials, distribution, transportation, warehousing, wholesaling, retailing and marketing. In this entire process, the restaurant owners play an important role in maintaining a long-lasting relationship to conduct business with a smooth flow. The purchase of raw materials and ingredients may not be transparent but has a massive impact on customer satisfaction. Restaurants that operate without any licenses and certifications may not give importance to quality and health but may look forward to bargain and save a decent amount from their partners. The process cannot be repeated in the post-COVID-19 period because customers are now the real kings, who will question the process to ensure that they are served only the food prepared with care and quality. Uncertainty is inherent in all kinds of business organisations.

In contrast to risk, uncertainty is not measurable or predictable. However, many times, people do not differentiate between risk and uncertainty. More often, people make the mistake of perceiving an uncertain situation as risky. Hence, making wrong decisions lead to erroneous outcomes. Also, some entrepreneurs live in an imaginary world. As long as they get a stable and constant number of customers for their business, they feel content. They perceive their business to be more specific and stable, a situation that might continue forever. At most, they worry about their competitors and the inventory cost or input cost. Little do they worry about other forms of

uncertainties. Among the service sectors, this pandemic has primarily affected the restaurant business.

The critical difference between a hotel and a restaurant is that it includes dining facilities while the former provides accommodation. In developing economies, a large number of restaurants operate in unorganised sectors as well. Restaurants range from fine, posh dining to casual joints. The working styles of these restaurants vary from each other. Over a period, there has been a sharp increase in the number of outlets, and most of them could still thrive despite the presence of many other joints in the same locality. The reasons could be many. The increase in the number of families with double income is one of the main reasons these outlets thrive. There is increased spending on convenience food among the dual-income families during their initial years of marriage (Michman, 1980).

The Internet revolution, though a boon, is also the cause for intrusion into family life. It has paved the way for 24/7 work. With organisations becoming more demanding, the time spent on domestic chores, such as cooking, has reduced. The breakdown of joint families into nuclear ones increased dependency on these food outlets. Migration, due to education or employment, has become common. Youth move from their place of origin to cities, looking for differential education. Due to imbalanced growth, the movement to big cities has been witnessed, irrespective of educational levels. Hence, both skilled and unskilled labour moves to cities searching for employment opportunities, thus contributing to these restaurants' growth.

Working families and migrants constitute the demand side. Home-grown entrepreneurs, who were part of the food businesses that were run as family businesses, represent the supply side. They also have migrated to other parts of the country, looking for greener pastures to establish themselves. It is a ubiquitous sight to find these food joints located in residential localities. As mentioned before, these joints' operating style is diversified, with each one fostering its unique selling proposition. In a country like India, people come from diverse communities and backgrounds with varied food habits. Over a period, these joints have started capitalising on their varied food habits by offering cuisines specific to particular geographic locations. Hence, they cater to the needs of a specific group of customers. Instead, they believe in customising food according to the place of origin of the customers. This operating style was very profitable, as each joint worked within its boundaries. It is common to find multiple joints operating in the same locality. It was a win-win situation for all these eateries, as they were working with less risk, as they had a specific number of customers who visit their joints regularly. Indeed, this kind of customisation is necessary, as food habits differ according to geographical locations.

The ingredients used for preparing food also varies with locations. However, the emotional connect is an essential factor for the migrants more than the taste and flavour. Frequent visits increase familiarity with outlets. After a certain period, these joints also become highly

dependent on their customers. Their understanding is reflected in the mode of payment. The daily payments are converted to monthly payments with discounts—both the outlet and customers benefit. For the outlet, the customer base is assured. For the customer, food is offered at discounts for a fixed menu. This practice removes significant uncertainty. The outlet need not have to worry over its supplies, be it raw materials or food, as it has a fixed customer base. It should be noted that these eateries deal with highly perishable inventories. With a set number of customers and menu, the joints have reached a point where they can conduct their operation with absolute certainty.

Unfortunately, this pandemic has turned all these practices awry. Migrants who were either single or had left their families behind had started returning to their place of origin, thus leaving these eateries in a dilapidated condition. As mentioned before, the return of these internal migrants is unknown because it is more bounded with the fear of being affected. Though they might return to these small and big cities to continue with their corporate work and other routine earning activities, they might not prefer eateries, considering hygiene and safety. The pandemic that triggered the lockdown brought all economic activities to a standstill, including the restaurant business, which functioned very actively. Although, within a short period, the government permitted these small joints to operate, unfortunately, the migrants, who were their primary customers, had left the city.

The strategy of customising offerings, which was earlier a boon, is now fatal. A diversified approach, perhaps, would have been better. It is challenging for these joints to embrace a diversified strategy, as it would require investment in workforce resources such as chefs. Further, they have to develop strategies to target different groups of customers and instil trust. Although circular migration could be expected, small joints that operate on slim margins might find it challenging to sustain. Even if they were able to maintain, the cost of operations would have increased considerably. The supply chain has been affected severely. Due to the lack of logistics and transportation, large quantities of agricultural produce were discarded, causing severe strain on the food prices.

Post lockdown, a sizable section of these migrants would return, but with higher expectations. They would demand hygiene services but at reduced costs. However, for the outlets, managing cost and, at the same time, instilling trust would be a challenge. Agility is the key to adapt to the recent changes in the economy. Most of the past research considered the skill to be a strategy suitable for significant corporate sectors and not for service providing institutions.

Organisational agility was explored in the hotel industry by Mahlagha Darvishmotevali 2020. The author has collected data from 5-star hotels to understand the agility strategies that face uncertainty. The author has considered three uncertainties related to technological, market and competitor sections. . Uncertainty will be a hazard, not allowing the organisation to be creative.

In contrast, agility is the mediation leading to a positive outcome. Considering this as a base, the role and importance of organisational agility has been brought into the picture.

Organisational agility was looked at more as a management principle, which was popularly used by managers of larger establishments to deal with uncertain situations and to regulate the business functions accordingly (Harraf, Wanasika, Tate, & Talbott, 2015), (Teece, Peteratd, & Leih, 2016). However, the concept of Organisational Agility (OE) is to be practised irrespective of the firm's size or the nature of the business because every business faces uncertainty and needs strategic decisions to sustain in the uncertain post-period (Appelbaum, Calla, Desautels, & Hasan, 2017a), (Appelbaum, Calla, Desautels, & Hasan, 2017b). Organisational agility was majorly used by the manufacturing concerns to deal with uncertainty due to a change in speed, flexibility, customers, competitors, suppliers, infrastructure, and responsiveness. It is essential to understand whether these small restaurants possess absorptive capacity (Cohen and Levinthal 1989) to acquire new knowledge and adapt accordingly. In this study, we suggest using OA as an effective tool to frame better strategies to sustain in the post-COVID-19 crisis. Those elements in the manufacturing units are also applicable to small businesses.

Research Motivation

Food is the primary element essential for a healthy and happy life (McMichael, 2000). COVID-19 situations have created panic among the consumers and fear among restaurant owners (Chang, McAleer, & Ramos, 2020) (Kumar, 2020). Those trusted, loyal customers are now not seen engaging actively in the service consumption process. As there is a drastic decrease in demand, the supply has been affected widely and has left negative upshots in the hospitality industry (Hobbs, 2020). The general assumption that restaurants in the big and small cities in India, which are associated with food delivery apps, might be successful, is also proven to be wrong because consumers fear online-based delivery, which might be one of the modes of spreading disease (Hasanat et al., 2020). This research's motto suggests a strategic business model, which can be implemented for business sustainability in the post-COVID-19 situation by restaurants in small and big cities (Lu et al., 2020), (Baker, Farrokhnia, Meyer, Pagel, & Yannelis, 2020). The strategies have been suggested based on the interview conducted with selected respondents, who gave valuable insights from their experiences. To bring in commonality in the marketing mix, the 7Ps of marketing (Bhasin, 2011), (MindTools, 2015), (Professional Academy, 2018) have been brought into consideration for the restaurants in big and small cities.

The present study seeks to answer the following questions.

Research questions

- Do restaurant owners possess the ability to learn from the changing environment?
- How far are restaurant owners able to strategise for business success in the post-COVID-19 crisis?

- Is there a difference in the coping strategy between the restaurants that operate in big and small cities?
- Will there be any opportunities, which can be grabbed by the restaurant owners in the post-COVID-19 crisis?
- What is the technological agility, which will boost the reputation of the restaurants in the post-COVID-19 crisis?
- Will there be a closure of the business due to the hygiene and safety scare?
- Will, the entrepreneurs in big cities have better exposure, and would they be able to better adapt to the current situation?
- Would the restaurant owners in the big cities be more confident compared to their counterparts in small towns?

Interview schedule

To capture the real issues and challenges faced by them, restaurant owners in small and big cities have used an interview schedule. Any research depending on an interview schedule has to go through the validation process, and hence we have followed the method mentioned by (Prescott 2011). In this interview schedule, open-ended questions help to get more clarity on the experience sharing, rather than just making it a one-way introspection. The interview schedule is designed with 17 questions, which are cherry-picked considering: *background related questions, experience related questions, significant problems in the industry and abilities and strategies to deal with problems*. These questions, which are spread in all dimensions, will help the interviewer to arrest new variables from the response given by the interviewee. The interview schedule is attached in an annexure for perusal.

Sampling method

For this research, the respondents were the owners of restaurants operating in small and big cities. The respondents were selected based on the convenience sampling technique. For this research, ten respondents consented to give their responses for the research purpose, provided their identities were not disclosed.

Marketing mix elements a standard yardstick for restaurants in big and small cities

This table will give a comparative analysis for the readers to know that the 7 Ps of marketing, which is also known as the marketing mix elements, will not remain constant and will differ based on the nature of the cities. As mentioned above, cities are bound with many factors, such as the socio-economic status, fund flow, nature of the business, the applicability of government rules and regulations, spending patterns and consumer behaviour. Hence, the discussion is based on the experiences shared by the restaurant business owners who hail from different cities. Small, urbanised settlements play an essential role in India extending employment opportunities, especially in the food sector. Though the job opportunities may not offer high payments, the

subsistence levels would be sufficient to run a decent life (Frick & Rodríguez-Pose, 2018), (Pink, 2009). Keeping this in mind, most migrant workers do not like to work in restaurants, which are part of small cities.

The big cities need workers to cope with the demand, where the payment is more decent than the level of subsistence (Duranton & Puga, 2014). Since these cities employ more than 10 workers, they must be registered with the Ministry of Labour welfare, which extends policies for its benefits.

The employees working in restaurants in big cities are internal migrants who have come from different parts of India to search for jobs. However, COVID-19 has forced the migrant workers to leave their hometowns due to the virus's spread, one of the reasons for their failure in the hotel industry. The organisational agility is to frame strategies to get the migrant workers back to work to function smoothly, without any discrepancies. Moreover, restaurants and eateries operating in small cities may not have a push tourist attraction and may depend only on the more reliable local crowds. This may not motivate them to strategise creative ideas for business growth or enhancement. However, in big cities, the competition is high, pushing restaurant owners to bring in pictures to sustain themselves in the market (Agha & Taks, 2015). There is also a significant difference in geographical location. Hence, in this research, big and small cities have been considered, keeping the marketing mix elements constant.

Table No 1: Comparison between big and small cities based on marketing mix elements

7 Ps of marketing	Big cities (Chennai, Bangalore, Pune, Hyderabad)	Small towns (Kochi, Coimbatore, Madurai, Amaravathi)
Product	More creative, new varieties, more assortment, exclusive offerings	Retention of the existing food menu and no changes
People	Wearing Mask to be mandated for the employees	Does not want to spend for the welfare of the workers
Place	Online Platforms	Traditional models, Brick and mortar models
Price	Price to remain the same	Price to remain the same
Promotion	Hygiene Based	No much promotions
Process	No dining, only takeaways	No dining but will give importance to packed food

Physical Evidence Do not want to invest in infrastructure Do not want to invest in infrastructure

Discussion

The 7Ps in marketing, comprising Product, Price, Place, Promotion, People, Process, and Positioning, are the core elements for any business success. Hence, in this research, we established a link between organisational agility and seven marketing mix elements. In the post-COVID-19 situation, all restaurants have to frame lean strategies to reduce wastage and optimise the best available resources. One of the respondents in a big city, when asked about the current situation, said, "I am very optimistic about expanding as many of the outlets are willing to sell at a lesser cost, which wouldn't have been possible earlier. In the present situation, through expansion, we may not be able to earn huge profits. Still, with an appropriate strategy, we would attract customers and cover the overhead cost such as rent. We are coping, and we know that we have to live with it."

Hence, this pandemic is seen as an opportunity to acquire businesses. Those restaurant owners in the big cities consider uncertainty to be an opportunity. This may be because of their exposure, networking ability, knowledge and the experience of dealing with other uncertainties. However, regarding small cities and the towns, it was found that there may not be many changes in the coping strategies because of lack of awareness and business guidance and because small business owners do not possess the resources to revamp the restaurant business in the post-COVID-19 crisis. This has been supported by the statements of an interviewee belonging to a small city, such as Coimbatore in Tamil Nadu, where the business owner mentions that they have a set of customers who are loyal and were visiting the restaurant regularly for a long. With the same expectation, they waited for the post-COVID-19 crisis. Moreover, it was mentioned that they do not have resources to spend on hygiene, but one strategy was to ensure that the restaurant does not get overcrowded. For this initiative to be taken in the post-COVID-19 crisis, the restaurant will give importance to the takeaway mechanism.

Moreover, they fear that they will lose the existing resources if they further decide to work on new strategies on a large scale. There is a lack of exposure, no guidance, lack of funds for expansion, absence of creativity and agile thinking, which becomes a hardship for small city-based restaurant owners to cope with uncertainty, especially in the post-COVID-19 crisis. To support the fact, a small-city-based restaurant owner says, "I have a decent restaurant business extending services to a targeted group of customers. I run the restaurant with the help of my family members, and I have limited resources and a decent earning, with which I am satisfied. I may not venture into a new industry in the post-COVID-19 crisis because I do not know other business ideas and knowledge. Hence, the only option left for me is to wait for a better tomorrow (post-COVID-19) to restart my restaurant business. However, I have a few strategies, which I

will incorporate, such as parcel services, extending dinner services etc. I may not be able to work on exclusive strategies to add extra values, which involves heavy investment.”

Product

Thus, “*product*” becomes a super hit when hygiene and varieties are introduced to satisfy the customers. However, there could be a difference of opinion between the restaurants that operate in small and big cities. A restaurant owner in a big city said, “Hence, we should concentrate on new varieties of food not served by other restaurants. Most have improved their cooking skills by going through online videos”. In the small cities, the restaurant owners may not take efforts to enhance the product quality nor bring in new assortments due to cost. Hence, in the smallertowns, restaurants may maintain the existing menus, which are familiar to the local people.

People

The food sector in big cities was a haven for migrant workers. However, this pandemic led to reverse migration, with workers starting to move back to their places of origin. To fill this vacancy, many local workers, who have lost their jobs, found that this was an excellent opportunity. The challenge now is to train this new workforce to cope with the current situation, which will involve cleanliness, meeting customers’ expectations, experience, and satisfaction leading to loyalty. In the past, not much priority was given to such aspects; nevertheless, it has become a significant need for small restaurants to become agile. Giving importance to customers and other stakeholders associated with the restaurant business and organisational agility, will facilitate prioritising the needs and wants of “*people*”. Health and hygiene of the employees and customers is the prerogative for these businesses in big cities. “I feel traditional methods will not work. For the employees, we need to make wearing a mask as a mandate. Further, for the customers, we need to provide sanitising facilities, although it would add to the cost of operation. Otherwise, we may not get customers coming into our restaurants.”

However, restaurants in smaller cities say that they may give importance only to the basic facilities and may not have sufficient resources to provide extraordinary services to maintain cleanliness and hygiene. An anonymous respondent said: “I may not employ an extra person to sanitise and take care of the hygiene in my restaurant, because paying them wages is an additional burden. Moreover, there is no availability of employees to work in a restaurant, which may be an abysmal job. I run my restaurant on a strictly planned budget, and extra spending for cleanliness may not be possible to think of now because due to closure, I am running out of funds.

Place

Earlier, operators in big cities gave importance to physical space. They felt that doing business through online platforms was risky, as minor issues would be made public through online reviews. Hence, they never thought of going online. Now there is a change in their mindsets. They feel that they are left with no option except to harness technology.

Henceforth, they want their presence to be felt in the online medium. However, the restaurants in the small cities could not think about navigating to the virtual platform because of no exposure and fear of investing massive amounts, as that would require additional labour to manage the technology.

Price

For this factor, the operators in big as well as small cities had similar opinions. They do not want to increase or decrease the price. They would lose customers if the prices were increased. Conversely, they would not be able to meet their operating costs if they reduce the prices. Moreover, they would not be able to attract new customers with increased prices.

Promotion

In the post-COVID-19 situation, disinfecting restaurants and spending for cleanliness would be an added cost to the additional cost burden and unmanageable. Yet, it should be practised to attract customers. Customers are now well aware of the precautions, and they expect even the small restaurants to follow hygienic practices. With a very deep evaluation mechanism about their budget framework, the smaller restaurants can optimise their present resources (Lean strategy) so that the savings can be allocated for cleanliness. Thus lean thinking to optimise the resources in the post-COVID-19 situation is an organisational agility-based strategy. One of the respondents operating in a big city when quizzed about introducing hygiene measures said:

"When the lockdown was announced, we shut shop only for 25 days. Once the government started easing the rule, we understood that our customers were concerned about their health. Hence, we introduced disposable plates and cups. The customer has to dispose of the used plates and cups on their own in the basket kept near the washbasin. We started providing hot water facilities for washing hands and drinking. Although the disposable plates and cups were adding costs at this point, attracting and retaining customers is key. Further, due to the reduced demand, certain ingredients, such as flour, decreased. So the cost was compensated."

However, in small cities, hygiene is not given much importance because there are no extra funds available. It is said that only the basic facilities will be maintained.

Anonymous: “I have been taking care of the basic hygiene facilities in my restaurants. Once there was a complaint from the customers stating that the plates are not washed properly, which was immediately rectified from then until date. We ensure that we use good quality washing soap to clean the plates. However, I cannot spend on hand sanitisers and sanitising the restaurant every day, because I have to spend on human resources and pay extra wages, which is not possible. At present, I have two employees working with me who assist me. The wages for them is quite high. If I appoint a new employee, then I have to pay him extra. Loyal customers will not look much for high cleanliness. I will be happy with my small group of frequent customers.”

Process

Thus, considering the mistakes and passive attitude of the small restaurants, clear and new commitments should be planned to smoothly run the business without any disruptions in the post-COVID-19 situation. Hence, the “*Process*” of running a restaurant business becomes essential to be considered. It is well-known that people are afraid to visit restaurants and are more bothered about the quality of the food, considering not only the taste but also the hygiene, in the very first position. Small restaurants are usually not maintained well, and consumers who visit these restaurants do not create a scene but have an easy-going mentality. However, in the post-COVID-19 pandemic in big cities, even those moving crowds visiting small restaurants will look forward to hygienic food being delivered in their residence as they would not prefer to dine, “People have become health conscious. They are more worried about hygiene and not taste. We would increase parcel services and takeaways as people may not want to dine”. In small cities and township areas, the new cuisines and ideas to introduce attractive menus are absent.

Anonymous: I have been extending breakfast and lunch services for crowds of customers, who are selective about the taste and quality I serve in my restaurant. Moreover, I do not have a variety of menus at present, but I could attract a good number of customers on a day-to-day basis. Maybe in the post-COVID-19 crisis, I have to extend my services by providing dinner with the same menu which was given for breakfast. Thus, I may not introduce a recent spread of food, which might need special training and expensive fresh ingredients. Moreover, I cannot give different cuisines until the situation gets back to normal. I will also ensure that I strictly monitor all the resources and avoid wastage to the extent possible.”

However, restaurant owners in the small cities and township areas also mention the same scenario. They say takeaways can be a significant element, which can be considered to avoid further spread of disease. To prevent this, packed food can be an exclusive option. Customer satisfaction in small cities can be ensured with a regular menu, good distribution services, and affordable prices. These three elements attract most of the customers.

Anonymous: “One of the major reasons for the success of my business is that I operate even after 10 p.m. and offer fresh food for customers who are going home after office work. They sometimes eat and carry takeaways, which might be one of the reasons that they are loyal and satisfied with the services.”

Physical Evidence

Many small-run restaurants attract people who are below or just above the poverty line and cannot afford to eat in mid-sized or large restaurants, which have been known for their branding. However, those preferring small-sized restaurants do not mind overcrowding, lack of proper ventilation and lighting, urinals and lavatories and appropriate handwashing facilities. These small-restaurants are in polluted places, such as a busy street, which accommodates significant movements of the population. Hence, selecting the desired location to run the restaurant was never a substantial criterion for these business owners. Small restaurants could also sell food near busy, crowded roads, with no proper hygiene. In the post-COVID-19 situation, consumers would prefer those restaurants with hygienic facilities and more space. The operators in big and small cities are cautious about investing in infrastructure.

Conclusion

The restaurants operating in big cities are comparatively more agile. They are gearing up to leverage the existing situation. Keeping the price constant, they focus on introducing new varieties to attain organisational creativity leading to sustainability. They have imbibed hygienic practices, such as sanitising and ensuring that their employees wear masks. They have understood that they have to accept the reality that has arisen due to the pandemic. The operators in the big and small cities did have concerns about investing in infrastructure. The reason is that there is no flow of money because of less demand. The small-run restaurants have to meet other expenses, such as payment of wages or salaries for the employees, purchase of raw materials, electricity, maintenance and improving infrastructure from their private savings. They had a similar consensus in pricing strategy also, because they were not able to attract or retain customers.

Interestingly, among the 7 Ps, there was more emphasis on the process, in which they expressed their concerns on dining. They felt that they have to focus more on food distribution services, such as packed food and takeaways. Considering the customer's profile, it is understood that more dependency was found on migrant customers among operators in the big cities, while in smaller ones, it was the local crowd. Hence, diversified strategies that cater to the requirements of different segments of the population must be adopted.

It was also observed that herd behaviour was widely followed because of uncertainty and a confused state of business progression. The restaurants started imitating their counterparts located near their establishment, who were a source of motivation. At the same time, it was

because of their irrational decisions and intellectual confusion. Moreover, herd behaviour may lead to business success, or it may not. The restaurant whose neighbourhood shops were closed also decided to close their business. On the other hand, restaurants that had their neighbourhood shops open chose to operate.

The study gives an essential direction to policymakers to frame policies for operators in small cities. Perhaps skill development workshops for the restaurant operators can be conducted in small towns, as their exposure is less, compared to the bigger ones.

Interview questions

1. What kind of customers used to come to your outlet? Single or married? What was the age group of customers who used to go to your outlet?
2. Are there any positioning strategies used by you for your restaurant business; who is the target audience (moving crowd or constant customers)?
3. Your restaurant would be more crowded on which day of the week? Also, in a day, will there be more crowds for breakfast, lunch, dinner or evening snacks?
4. Did you get more crowds during occasions such as family functions? If so, when?
5. Will you give importance to hygiene factors in the post-COVID-19 situation to attract new customers?
6. Post lockdown, was your business the same? If so, what do you think was attracting your customers? If not, do you think the business is going to revive shortly?
7. To attract your customers, what are the strategies you are planning to follow?
8. How are you going to position your services in the post-COVID-19 situation?
9. Will there be more transparency in the process in the post-COVID-19 health crisis?
10. How far do the other hotels in your locality or other localities motivate or demotivate you?
11. What are the specific business uncertainties, which you have faced before?
12. How did you handle the previous uncertainties, and what strategies did you embark on?
13. How well are you prepared to face the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on your business?
14. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, do you think customers have lost hope in your services?
15. What are the essential major strategies to enhance customers' trust?
16. Are you going to depend on new technologies and digital communication to reach mass consumers to gain popularity in the post-COVID-19 situation or follow the traditional service rendering process?
17. What type of support is needed from the government to revamp your business?

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