



(Left) Rakesh Mane, store manager, Star Market, Churchgate, Mumbai; and (right) Bharat Radhakrishnan, operations manager, StarQuik



Our Retail Heroes

The Covid-19 warriors who are taking care of your daily needs

BY NAMRATA NARASIMHAN

Rakesh Mane hasn't seen his newborn baby, his older child and his family since the lockdown began, but he makes sure South Mumbai's Star Market outlet in Churchgate, where he is the store manager, opens on time every morning despite the lockdown.

Rakesh has been staying in a hotel near the store since March. His employer, Star — Trent Hypermarket — has not only provided for his stay and other needs but also lauded his undying spirit and unfazed temperament in keeping the Star outlet running, especially as shoppers turned up in droves at grocery stores as soon as the nationwide lockdown was imposed.

“My family was a little worried initially, but they know that Star and Tata will take care of me,” he says, adding, “My wife, who is a nurse and is currently on maternity leave, is extremely supportive and understands that essentials like groceries need to be made available.”

Amar Valivarathy, store manager, Star Bazaar, Bengaluru, echoes the same sentiments. “Initially, I had my fears, and my family was also against me going to the store, but I explained the precautions we are taking; they do understand that we are in the essential commodities business.”

GETTING AHEAD

Both Rakesh and Amar admit that it wasn't easy at the start of the Covid-19 lockdown as people thronged the stores, worrying about the availability of essential commodities. “This led to shortage of a few items in our stores,” they say, adding, “We used to have long queues in the morning; by evening we would run out of fruits and vegetables. We ordered extra supplies to overcome the problem.”

“At Star Market, Churchgate, we started a token system to manage crowds and things began to settle down,” says Rakesh, who was most



Amar Valivarathy, store manager, Star Bazaar, Bengaluru

often working both shifts in a day to keep things functioning smoothly and, initially, did without his weekly offs too.

Shortage of staff was another problem during these times, with many employees staying far away from the store and being unable to commute to work. Working through and around a problem seems to be the ‘new normal’, including arranging for buses so that employees from some of the areas could commute and store managers directly taking delivery of supplies at the store because of personnel shortage. The senior leadership also stepped in on various occasions to ensure smooth functioning at the stores. Rakesh also spoke to various family members of employees, assuring them about the hygiene measures in place. When employees found it tough to find food options during the lockdown, Rakesh and Amar, along with the managers of various other stores, ensured the availability of food and beverages for employees.

It is heartening to note that the ‘One Tata’ spirit has been kept alive even in these trying times, says Amar, adding, “I didn’t expect to see employees from other Tata brands — Westside, Zudio and Croma under the larger Trent umbrella — pitch in during the lockdown. It was then that I realised why the Tata group stands apart.”

The transition from selling clothes and gadgets to groceries wasn’t easy, but they were willing to learn. “Leveraging their roles and backgrounds in their respective stores, some associates took on the responsibility of restocking the shelves, while personnel from Westside handled the cash registers as they were familiar with the software, having used a similar one in their stores.,” says Amar.

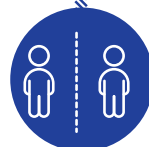
NEW PROTOCOLS

“In the post-Covid world, initially we had to urge customers to follow the new protocols of social distancing, wearing face masks, sanitising hands and getting a temperature check before entering the stores. By and by, they realised the merit in doing all of this,” says Rakesh. Today, they thank the staff profusely for being so meticulous and, occasionally, buy them a chocolate as a token of appreciation. “I’m happy to work and be of help to the society and my company in these troubled times,” he adds. **TR**

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Covid-19 protocols

- Social distancing norms on shop floor and outside the stores in customer queues
- Providing tokens to manage shoppers inside the store
- Sanitising hands and taking temperature checks on entering the store
- Wearing face masks is mandatory
- Wearing of gloves by staff while handling fresh food
- Disinfecting the stores on a regular basis
- Regular cleaning of all trolleys, baskets and other equipment



Welcome To



#AasaanGrocery

StarQuik – Delivering groceries at your doorstep

This date, March 14, 2020, will forever remain etched in my memory, for it was on this date that states began closing the malls due to the coronavirus threat; and we saw a huge surge in orders on our delivery app, StarQuik,” says Bharat Radhakrishnan, operations manager, StarQuik.

StarQuik – which currently offers delivery services in certain parts of Mumbai, Bengaluru and Pune – operates through a business model where pickers are responsible for picking the customer-requested items off the shelves from the local Star outlets, while the delivery executives do the last mile delivery on motorbikes, autorickshaws or vans.

“In the initial days of the lockdown, due to disparity in communication between what the government directives said and what the cops on the ground were told to do, we faced difficulties with not just deliveries but also our pickers could not reach the stores, resulting in delayed deliveries,” says Bharat, adding, “For instance, police personnel weren’t aware of autorickshaws being used for delivery, so they were sceptical about letting them ply. At the same time, online orders increased exponentially. We have never seen anything like it; all the slots would be full in a few minutes. It was almost

like people were staring at the app all the time waiting for the slot to open”. Given the ground realities, StarQuik had to reduce the number of deliveries in the early phase of the lockdown. As the situation on the ground improved with clarity on the delivery of essentials, things started looking up.

“Often, our intrepid delivery staff pick up colleagues from homes on their way to the stores so that more staff can reach the store,” says Bharat, adding, “They are willing to do it for the company, and say that more hands mean that orders can be delivered to more customers, and I am proud to say that our employees have stopped seeing this as a business and more as a service to humanity at this point.”

“It’s been a very surreal experience, seeing such crowded cities suddenly so empty,” says Bharat who has often gone out of his way to deliver orders personally, wherever possible.

“I am happy that I am in this place right now. Because I feel like I am making a direct difference. I did not anticipate this coming, and it feels good to be part of the fraternity of healthcare professionals, policemen and others who are working round the clock to fight the Covid-19 pandemic,” adds Bharat.

