



## BOOK REVIEW

### **Malled: My Unintentional Career in Retail**

**Hardcover, 240 pages**

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Malled is a semi-autobiographical account of the author Caitlin Kelly. Kelly has shared her experiences of working in a retail store (North Face) in a mall. North Face is a national chain of high-end outdoor wear. The author has described the painful circumstances under which she had to switch careers from being a journalist to a retail store associate in North Face store.

Caitlin had been working as a reporter and a feature writer for the New York Daily News until the day she was fired in July 2006. Left with no choice except to work as a freelance writer and unable to find a full time job as a journalist, Caitlin decided to switch careers and entered retail.

While the book gives you a clear idea of how the retail sector functions and the egregious manner in which retail store associates are treated, Caitlin repeats things to a point of no-return until it manages to irritate you as a reader. Notwithstanding this, a lot of the stuff that Caitlin has written about the horrific experiences that she had as a retail store associate makes sense. The conditions under which retail employees work – whether in US or China or in India remain the same. This is a significant learning from the book.

However, Caitlin has presented the entire story from her perspective often glorifying herself as a star performer who never got her due from North Face. At times the carping becomes excessive and you wonder why she stayed on for two years in a part-time job that she did not like. One of the biggest shortcomings of the book is the fact that Caitlin keeps on repeating the same stuff over

and over again – that retail stores pay low wages to its associates, the place where the stock is stored is poorly maintained, store employees have to stand for long hours, the huge pay disparity between top management and lower level front line employees etc.

Let us look at the other pitfalls of the book. Ideally the book should have been titled as “Stored” instead of “Malled” as the author has shared her experiences working in a retail store in a mall. After losing her job as a journalist, she landed herself the low level job (as per her own admission) of a part time retail store associate. So even when she was working just about two days a week in the retail store and continuing her regular work as a freelance writer, she has only terrible things to share about her work experiences. Occasionally she does mention that the job as a store associate helped her to pay the credit card bills. But this is more of an exception. Otherwise the book is full of her sordid experiences in the retail store that affected her physical and mental health. One feels relieved, towards the end of the book, when she writes that she has decided to quit her job.

If the author had stayed away from bringing in too many of her personal opinions and biases in the book, the book could have made for better reading. There is a limit to the negativity that one can read especially about a subject like retail marketing – where lots of information is already available.

If one was to ignore all these drawbacks, then the book really opens the doors to inform the reader about the various challenges in retail. For retailers, this book

can be an eye-opener about the way the business is being run today and reasons why most retail strategies fail. Complacency kills businesses, and this is very much true for the retail sector as well. Only focusing on profitability without having a strategic approach is bound to lead to failure of retail businesses. Strategic approach has to include the people dimension and its significance in growing business and increasing margins. The book has made it clear that consumer is not worried only about the discounts – he is equally disoriented with a bad shopping experience at the retail store.

A retail store has to be a functional workspace where it can be fun working. However, most retail stores manage to saddle their store associates (frontline employees) with more and more work, long working hours and poor pay. No retailer ever wants his employees to make a career in retail. Attrition is high in retail due to the long working hours and sub-optimal pay. Most retailers never reward their employees for a good performance as they have punitive measures in place for minor infractions.

Reading Kelly's book makes one wonder whether all the retail marketing principles and theories that we read in books are of mere academic relevance. James Heskett proposed the theory of "Service Profit-chain" in which he explains that companies should treat their employees well and keep them happy so that they can serve the customers better which in turn will enhance business profitability. However, retailers hardly seem to take cognizance of this fact. Now there is a craze about big data and analytics whereas brass tacks (people issues) remain untouched. Undeserved attention on attracting customers using technology without paying attention to service delivery can prove to be costly for businesses in the long run.

As Kelly has rightly pointed out, operational efficiency (read: cost reduction) is always attempted to be achieved by businesses only through head count reduction or by reducing the labour cost. Seldom do retailers negotiate rental/lease rates or look at reducing top management compensation or by adopting frugal measures at the store level. The pay parity between top level employees and low level employees in retail is conspicuous by its absence.

Actually, when we talk about retail, it is a vicious cycle. Retailers believe that their frontline employees are anyway going to leave after a while, so they do not focus much on training them or rewarding them with perks/bonuses and a promising career ahead. The employees on the other hand find the pay unsatisfactory, the working hours long, the job conditions poor and customers too

demanding. So, most retail employees do not provide a good service often driving away customers from the store due to their indifference/rude behavior/poor customer service levels. Very few store employees invest time in efforts to convert a prospect into a customer. This leads to a dip in store profitability and eventually when the store shuts down its operations, the employees end up losing their jobs.

Kelly also rightly mentions that retail has become a refuge for those who do not get any other job and so the moment a better opportunity is spotted, the store employee leaves the job in retail and moves to greener pastures. This is why most retail businesses suffer.

This means that retailers drive their business growth only through profitability which alone cannot be a strategic metric. Retailers often claim that they have to kowtow to the needs of their shareholders and improve the top line and bottom line. But they do not understand that if they do not treat their store associates well, they cannot grow their business though they may continue to make marginal profits year on year.

Let us ponder about the challenges of working as a store employee:

- Working hours are unduly long leaving very little time for work life balance.
- Customers complain at the drop of a hat causing enormous stress.
- The degree of emotional labor required as a store associate is extremely high.
- The store may look attractive; visual merchandising may add to the brand appeal' but the storage rooms where the stock is stored can be poorly lit, congested and pose a number of safety hazards.
- The pay is seldom commensurate with the work involved in the retail store as a store employee.

Security concerns are immense – a store employee has to keep a watch on shoplifters even while delivering service to other customers. As many retail stores do not think twice about reducing staff at the floor level, a store employee – particularly one who has to work in late night shifts - is susceptible to attack by thieves and robbers.

Even though service marketing books describe the frontline employee as a kingpin in service delivery and calls these employees boundary spanners who are instrumental in the success of interactive marketing efforts, in reality the situation appears to be different. This is the picture that Kelly has portrayed.

The marketing efforts of frontline store associates are seldom acknowledged let alone rewarded. As top management is more inclined towards business growth and profitability, suggestions made by store employees are never given the importance that they deserve. The store employees are constantly made to feel that they are a mere cog in the wheel and that they are not only disposable but also replaceable. They are given plenty of instructions to follow orders and comply with policies. But their needs go unheard. Demoralized by the way they are treated, most store associates easily get frustrated, distracted and dis-jointed from what the business expects from them.

Kelly says that often the stress that they face as store employees seems too high for the salary that they earn. There is no medical insurance. Threat of a job loss looms large. Recessionary times can be a nightmare when there are impossible targets to fulfill at the store level. The physical and emotional wear and tear due to work that is drudgery often makes one irritable, touchy, grouchy and edgy. Customers from hell can make your life miserable. When there are sales targets to be achieved, the situation gets sticky when a store employee has to put up with customer abuse. When the revenues are growing, there is not a murmur from the retail's top management. But when there is de-growth, there are memos, surprise visits by advisors, periodic performance reviews, pay cuts and threats. Added to all this is the pressure created by mystery shoppers appointed by the corporate head office to gauge the service delivery quality of store employees.

Kelly rightly laments that whether it is the media or retail advisors or trainers or retail analysts – all of them speak about profitability, shrinkage, dipping retail margins, contribution of retail to GDP – but never are there reports from any quarters about the pitiable working conditions under which the front line employee has to slog. If store employees are treated as a replaceable resources then there is very little for the frontline sales employee to cheer about.

As retail sector is unable to attract good talent, it has to make do with people who are not so earnest in their approach and join the industry for a lark or as a stop-gap arrangement. Over the years this situation has only worsened. Even if we look at Indian retail, this observation rings true. So long as retail continues to provide succor to those who just use the employment in retail as a stop-gap arrangement, this problem will continue to persist. A job in retail sector should pave the path for a career. This will

need retailers to completely overhaul their present strategic mindset that is more skewed towards margins and profitability and growth.

Kelly however fails to point out that the lack of enthusiasm by store associates often leads to loss of sales. While there can be heavy rush during festive seasons, during other times the work load may be less. Somehow Kelly has missed this point altogether. The crowds in a mall are sparse during the week days and heavy in the weekends. Due to this disproportionate distribution of work, retailers do not feel the need to increase the pay. Even during a lean season, there are store employees who show little interest in selling or customer service. There are employees who always answer in the negative to customers' queries about other sizes or colors. The truth is that these employees often believe in shirking work and cause hidden losses to the store. Many retail stores now use closed circuit televisions to monitor employee behavior and there are tabs that garner customer feedback immediately after a transaction. It is indeed ironical that while retailers talk about CRM and moving from transaction-based approach to relation-based approach with customers, their approach to their own store employees remains transactional in nature. What about ERM? (Employee Relationship Management).

But one has to agree with Kelly that any retailer – how so big or small – must ensure safe working conditions for its employees. This is a hygiene factor. Security breaches by rogue elements and higher incidences of shoplifting put additional burden on the hapless store associate. In USA, a store employee was trampled to death when crowds came thronging into the store in response to a discount sale. Store employees have been murdered by robbers and shop breakers.

The truth is that in a crowded retail market space, there is space for everyone. The advent of online retail has not completely dimmed the fortunes of bricks and mortar stores. Mom and pop stores (the Indian kirana stores) continue to exist despite the popularity of super bazaars. However, if service quality in offline stores continues to deteriorate then this will open more doors and windows for the electronic retailers.

The problems that Caitlin Kelly has described in her book are applicable across many other industrial sectors. Job losses have become a common reality now. People are treated as a disposable resource rather than as an asset. Performance-linked pay is still a remote dream for many.

The business world is ruthless enough to focus on head count reduction (only) during periods when there is a business downturn. The suggestions of lower level employees are never heard or respected. Security in the store continues to remain a concern. The recent instance of the murder of an Infosys employee in Pune is proof enough of lax security measures and rogue elements masquerading as employees. If a murder can happen in the Pune office of software company that is a bellwether, what about the risks that a vulnerable store employee working in a late night shift has to endure? Profitability and not people interests continue to drive business agenda in retail. This is indeed sad.

The book presents such a grim and scary picture about retail that none from the younger generation would want to explore a career in retail. This is really sad because retail is one sector where there are immense opportunities for an individual to learn and enrich himself. Retailers should work with qualified HR professionals, to plan and chalk out a career path for those joining retail. Only then will retail become an attractive career option for the youngsters. Kelly says that it will be easier to attract more customers and retain them by using creative skills of the present generation who are more tech-savvy.

Kelly misses on the point that today retail is as much about customer experience as much as it is about branding

and visual merchandising. Though she has narrated instances of customers who were not happy with the service, she doesn't drive home the point that it is experience that draws the customers into the store again and again. To give her credit, there are sporadic cases reported by her, where store associates who managed to strike a rapport with customers ended up selling more. However, she defies all logic when she goes on an endless rant against customers and questions why the customer should be treated as God. This is a faux pas she could have done without. Without customer as the focal point of attention, no retail business can ever sustain. There can be terrorist customers, there can be finicky customers but to paint all customers in dark shades is something that is clearly not acceptable.

The book can be recommended to retail practitioners, advisers, students who pursue a post graduate degree in retail and faculty who teach retail marketing in business schools. It talks about the other side of retail – the inhuman side that is deplorable and often not easily noticeable as such behaviors easily get camouflaged under the glitter of advertising campaigns and marketing promotions. Reality bites hard and Kelly's book is a glaring example of the same.

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