

"Competition is human just like you and me."



Weekly Learnings 33 / 2023

I landed in Male yesterday for a keynote session at a Life Sciences company's offsite.

I was waiting for the boat to transfer me from the airport to the hotel when Arun Selvam walked up to me. Arun works for Coca-Cola Maldives and is from Salem. He was in Coca-Cola India till 2015 and was a competitor.

He is the key account manager in Coca-Cola in the Maldives and has a 100 pc market share!!

Arun was amazing, he insisted on treating me to a tea/coffee, took me to the coffee shop and ordered the tea/ coffee. He enquired about my booking etc and offered to help in any way. Arun was warm and gracious. It was humbling to be treated so well.

I reflected back on how we deal with competition as managers for this note.

1. We look at competition as enemies both at a company level and an individual level.
2. We look at competition as a zero-sum game, one wins other loses. In some individual cases, this could be true. eg for a promotion etc but the options are many.
3. I have always had good relationships with my competition from the time I was an area sales manager. I have always reached out and gone to see them in their offices.
4. I believe one competes in the consumer's mind and while you respect competition, you have to do a better job of winning with the consumer. In many cases, managers used media to pull down the competition.
5. In every company review meeting or board meeting, the competition is always portrayed as being underhanded, unscrupulous and doing silly things. In most cases this narrative is wrong.
6. In Nokia, I always asked for inputs from Motorola, Sony Ericsson, LG and Samsung if I was ever on a TV show or meeting the government on matters that could benefit the industry.

We ran an electronics waste recycling program for the whole industry and not just Nokia phones in the Nokia priority dealer retail network.

7. In PepsiCo, I reached out to Venkatesh Kini and Krishna Kumar and told them I would never speak ill of them in the media. We worked together to see if GST could be at 28pc. We went and met the late Finance Minister Mr Arun Jaitly in his office on a Saturday afternoon. Kini called me a day or two before the news of his leaving Coke. I respected that. When Roger Enrico of PepsiCo passed away Coca Cola ran a full-page ad in the USA saluting him. That was class.
8. Today's rules on products and advertising are much tighter and one cannot do what competing ads or claims did in the 90s. Today's social media also pushes consumers to take sides quickly. Consumers typically tend to favour the underdog because every individual has experienced that feeling on some occasion.
9. The nature of competition today is not between brands, but between ecosystems.

We need more Aruns in every industry. The industry will be a better place and will have more respect.

Respecting your competition but winning in the consumer's mind is my lesson.

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