

The Passion To Do

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NOLIMIT is a homegrown brand that has promoted retail inclusivity throughout the country. From developing Sri Lankan labels to introducing the best retail concepts from the globe to Sri Lanka, NOLIMIT has spearheaded change in the industry. N L M Mubarak, Founder and Chairman/CEO, NOLIMIT asserts that retail is a hands-on industry where one must empower people. He believes Sri Lanka has great potential and that the people of the country have much to offer. N L M Mubarak is a man of few words, where he has proved himself through his actions. He seeks no publicity or limelight for himself. N L M Mubarak is confident about the retail sector of Sri Lanka, and looks forward to the emergence of more homegrown businesses. He shares his thoughts in an interview for the first time.

By Udeshi Amarasinghe and Keshini De Silva

Photography Mahesh Bandara and Menaka Aravinda

NOLIMIT is a name that has expanded to areas in the country that no one else has ventured, what was the thinking behind this?

Colombo is generally where economy and fashion are concentrated in Sri Lanka. We feel that the people away from Colombo must also have access to fashion. We wanted to provide them with the same facilities and choice of products. There are many opportunities for our people because we have different attire depending on the occasion. At NOLIMIT, we have the complete wardrobe. That is why we have opened showrooms outstation wherever we can, so that we can provide fashion to everyone.

It was a bold decision to open stores in various locations, even in Colombo. What was the risk and how do you make these decisions?

In 1992, I opened a store in Dehiwala, it was small, only about 250 square feet. Subsequently, we opened another bigger store in Dehiwala. Later we moved to Liberty Plaza. We had a goal to open at least one showroom every year. It's not just about a big marketing process; it is about word of mouth. If the customers are happy, then they will spread the word. Customers will visit us because they believe in quality products. They must feel confident to shop. In 1992, the retail industry was at a very different stage, but we were bold and comfortable. That was the drive we had.

We mainly followed customer suggestions. We evaluated the possibilities and got into ventures. You must have confidence in your decisions. We are in the process of unveiling a unique showroom in Wattala with all modern facilities, we will be opening an outlet at Shangri-La Colombo and we are also planning to open another outlet in the greater Colombo area. We know there is opportunity in retail. Yet, no matter what you attempt, it needs to be done professionally. You should know what the customer wants exactly.

NOLIMIT has introduced its own brands and collections, and has also given Sri Lankan talent a space to showcase their labels. Can you elaborate on this?

International brands are comparatively expensive. We have ten designers working with us who are all professionally qualified. This is an opportunity for them as we can customise fashion to suit the Sri Lankan market. There are big youth brands, yet we have introduced a more reasonably priced Sri Lankan brand, Deedat. It is being requested for shelves in the Middle East and the Maldives, however we have not thought about these opportunities yet.

Similarly, the brands we offer are doing well. We see the development of international brands, but we also want our local brands to do well in the market.

At The End Of The Day, We Are Happy Because The Customer Gets The Benefit Of Choice. From Exchange Policy To Tailoring, Everyone Is Clamouring To Provide Services That We Introduced. That Is Fine, Because I Feel That We Have Set The Benchmark For The Industry.

We have a good and diversified workforce at NOLIMIT and we provide opportunity for all of them and we are proud of them. Our brands include MBRK, NLM, Huf & Dee, Pink Elephant, Singing Fish, Salma, Niza, ZED, Amr, Sara, Tom David, Fia Maria and Guru. We have brands that are mostly equal to international brands in terms of quality and style. We continuously renew our collections and develop the product and consider clothing that are suitable for the tropical climate.

For us, the product is the key. When the product is good, customers are attracted to it. We have an automated supply chain. We keep innovating so that we can handle the growth of our supply chain requirements.

NOLIMIT is known not just for clothing, but also for fashion jewellery, watches, hand bags, shoes and homeware. We research and understand trends.

You rarely introduce international brands. How did you make that choice?

We must know the profile of our customers, especially their pattern of dressing. We must make available of those items for their taste with quality. It is very important. Not everyone looks at the label. Some are drawn to the quality, design and creativity. I myself like international brands, but I felt that people in my country would require quality apparel within their spending capacity. The retail world is changing.

Due to the arrival of large number of tourists in Sri Lanka, the opportunity for international brands is developing. Many luxury malls are being built. These luxury malls require international brands, but we feel that there should be a mix up of both international brands and domestic brands to bring in greater footfall.

You have a strong in-house team and you continuously motivate your staff, what can you tell us about this?

This is a specialised field. At NOLIMIT we have passion, and make sure that directly and indirectly everyone knows the value we add to their lives. Retail can be a big factor in the country.

I believe in developing people, which is why we spend so much on training. Now that they have developed I am sure we will get the ROI. In spite of any situation, we are dedicated to give the best to the people.

We also have an efficient marketing team, and they do many things to promote the image of the brands.

Can you speak about the retail sector in the country, what more can be done?

The retail sector of Sri Lanka is taking on a new and bigger shape. A lot of stores are opened with heavy investments in interior, they employ people and display few merchandise and expect success immediately. Although the retail industry is booming on one side, you must see the other side of it as well. This is a hands-on business, the entire team has to be

involved. It is not just about investing money and employing people and expecting it to be a success. It needs hands-on supervision. Quality and services should be constantly monitored. Some of the stores of this nature are opened and closed soon. The closure is due to many reasons including inexperienced staff who do not care for the customers.

It takes at least three years to understand the good and the bad of the retail sector. If you can survive for three years, then you have what it takes. At the end of the day, we are happy because the customer gets the benefit of choice. From exchange policy to tailoring, everyone is clamouring to provide services that we introduced. That is fine, because I feel that we have set the benchmark for the industry. We do whatever the world practices, we bring it to the country.

You Have To Know The Market And Its Strengths... The New Super-Luxury Malls That Are Coming In Must Introduce A Mixture Of Brands.

In Sri Lanka there is great opportunity because there are many apparel factories. Of course you have to place an order for large quantities. As we have the strength to manufacture good quality apparel in Sri Lanka, we are thereby able to offer a good price to the customer.

Many who learned from us and left have established their own ventures and they are now bringing value to the retail sector.

Many international brands are coming in. What are your thoughts on this?

You have to know the market and its strengths. There are a certain percentage of brand conscious people. However, the new super-luxury malls that are coming in must introduce a mixture of brands. For so long, malls survived in Sri Lanka's small retail market with that concept. The mixture of brands will attract footfall. That is very important, because although a customer may purchase Sri Lankan brands when they are able to they will purchase a luxury brand.

There is also the competition from online stores, which offer affordable goods. Customers may go to the mall to have coffee and make purchases online. Online businesses are very popular in the United States. Because of this, many malls have closed in the United States.

For NOLIMIT the future strategy is to position the brand within malls to overcome the significant issue of parking. It is difficult to cultivate a good shopping experience without parking and it is something that we are weak in. Despite that customers do come to our showrooms because of our products. We are upgrading accordingly.

Shoppers are changing and our products are transforming with their requirements. There is much opportunity in retail today and we will see more change to come. We get large groups of foreign visitors shopping here, hence there is opportunity. Sri Lankans are good and very fashion conscious.

Likewise, we are looking into our shortcomings as well. We too must improve with the situation. We strive to reach the bottom end of the market as well.

Many new players are entering the retail sector. What is your advice to them?

The retail industry in Sri Lanka is coming up. Many shops are opened and that is a good sign. The only problem is many are shortsighted. They must be careful in their business and must invest in people. They should develop the staff in a diplomatic way. If these entities are still operating after three to four years, then they have made it.

The retail sector has great demand for our staff. I am happy because they have such a good image about our people, because they are looked after. My intention is to keep staff for a lifetime, but sometimes they move on. We have to change with the trends. Things need to improve in the sector.

Is the country ready for this retail expansion?

Yes. With the growing population and arrival of tourists, there are more opportunities, but concentrating on the quality of products, services, facilities and comforts to customers with parking and well-trained staff is required. We must review the market before starting up, especially with online stores booming. Currently, 800 malls are being closed down in the US, obviously we do not have that situation because we are a developing country. But we must learn and take a positive look. You must make decisions and create products carefully. This is where experience comes in. We are glad that we have contributed to an extent for the future retail development of the country.

We Hope To Meet The Expectations Of All Sri Lankans And Hopefully We Will See More Sri Lankans Coming Into Retail.

You have put all your effort into one industry. Why is that?

Retail is a big trade in the world. Today's luxury will be basic tomorrow. People require very comfortable and fashionable accessories; thereby we have expanded many categories of products to suit the younger generation. Retail in Sri Lanka is a big market, so why would I want to move into another sector? Now, I just think of investing in agriculture, especially in fruit cultivation. I love gardening and small farms.

You always give back to society can you tell us about this?

The whole world believes that what you earn, you must spend on people. I have money, but what do I do with all that money? I can spend it on developing people, and on giving them opportunities.

We have launched many CSR programmes in relation to education, sports, culture and health. We have contributed in developing the facilities of hospital wards in different parts of Sri Lanka including the Maharagama Cancer Hospital. We are also the winners of implementing the 5S system and have received the Gold awards. We then send our teams to teach 5S in schools across the country.

We earn from the people and then give back to the people. We do as much as possible.

Future plans?

We have three projects in progress. One is in Wattala, a big showroom. Another one is at Shangri-La Colombo. We are also planning to venture into the greater Colombo areas. This will benefit the people. It is time for people to enjoy themselves. Competitors know how they benefit from us. When we buy stocks of something, everyone wants to buy it. Then others get a good price too.

We are known for our friendliness. We have developed the business to suit our Sri Lankan culture. We have shown our staff to be happy and productive. We believe in a theme that if we keep the staff happy, then they will keep the customers happy. We are not involved in any form of loans in our business. We wish to continue the same values in the future too.

We hope to meet the expectations of all Sri Lankans and hopefully we will see more Sri Lankans coming into retail.

