

House of Fashions: Living the Dream

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On the final day of House of Fashions in Bambalapitiya, the customers overwhelmed the premises as word got around that ‘everything must go’ - nothing within the store was to remain unsold. Towards the end of a long day, Preethi and Neelamani Jayawardena took a moment to make a happy announcement that would leave their customers overcome with joy—all items in the hands of the customer would not be charged for. It was a gesture befitting the occasion, in a word—extraordinary.

Words Prasadini Nanayakkara **Photographs** Menaka Aravinda

“This is a dream come true for us,” says Neelamani of opening their new House of Fashions shopping complex in Borella. The store that was opened amidst much fanfare by President Mahinda Rajapaksa in early November does appear to be something out of a dream. In the thick bustle of Borella, the building that rises to nine floors stands to impress in its ritzy white grandeur. For Preethi and Neelamani, it was a far cry from their very first 10 by 10 shopping area along Galle Road over 20 years ago.

Within the 250,000 square foot premises of the building, the first five floors are solely for selling merchandise. And its interiors live up to the expectation that it inspires from a distance. Escalators flow from one floor to another and visual displays and modern day mannequins bring to life the sprawling spaces in novelty style. Shelves upon shelves of products occupy each floor dedicated to a particular range of goods. For the customers in Sri Lanka it is indeed an experience that ranks high in novelty, so much so that—as Neelamani states—even the President was compelled to exclaim in disbelief if he was indeed in Sri Lanka.

Indeed it can be said the story of House of Fashions is anythingbut ordinary. For instance the two entrepreneurs behind this accomplishment, Preethi and Neelamani Jayawardena are the sole operators of the entire complex and as a result can now lay claim to have opened the largest retail store in South Asia where the entire floor area is operated under single ownership.”Not a single unit of this building is given out to any other company,” says Preethi Jayawardena. The transformation of House of Fashions at its new premises is monumental to say the least. Customers can peruse through a greater variety of products. The first floor alone is dedicated entirely to perfumes, accessories and other personal care products. This variety escalates to electrical items and household appliances at the topmost floor. Conveniences that had fallen short in the old premises are remedied here with fit-on rooms and ample space for parking with a 350 capacity.

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Despite all of this House of Fashions remains true to one of its defining attributes as Neelamani assures that customers can find the lowest prices at House of Fashions. “I feel that it is House of Fashions that got people thinking about fashion and their dress sense, but it affected only a certain segment of our society,” adds Preethi. Accordingly House of Fashions introduces products from designer brands as well at markedly lower prices that cannot be had elsewhere. “There will be many other shopping malls and branded products in Sri Lanka in future but our people won’t be able to afford it. We want to reach the masses,” he says.

“Our sweat and blood have gone into this, we give 100 percent to our work...”

Preethi and Neelamani travel to countries such as England, US, France, Italy, China and Portugal to select products even before they reach the stores in the respective countries. Large volumes are purchased at reduced prices and sold at House of Fashions keeping narrow profit margins. This allows for the low prices at which even the branded items can be sold. “At any given time we purchase 20-25 containers of products and we always think of giving the customer a very fair price. Not a single cent is earned unfairly,” says Neelamani.

Upholding this sentiment of having the best interest of the customer at heart is what Preethi and Neelamani believe underline their success. “Why else would they stay in queues sometimes for long as over two hours?” A question they pose more out of comprehension than wonder. Accordingly House of Fashions regularly witnesses throes of customers who return again and again. On the first day of opening the new store saw the same crowds returning in ceaseless numbers and Preethi is confident that this trend will continue. Even tourists who make return visits to the Island are known to make House of Fashions a must-stop for a dose of retail therapy. “Word of mouth has been very effective for us, we do not need to advertise in newspapers or on tv as we don’t feel it is necessary,” she adds.

Their commitment to House of Fashions together with a dedicated staff is also an integral part of the recipe for success. “Our sweat and blood have gone into this, we give 100 percent to our work and you will find us here at any given time,” says Neelamani. About their unusual system of function Preethi further explains, “here

there are no COOs, CEOs or GMs to speak of, it's simply the two of us that run House of Fashions, together with our staff," says Preethi Jayawardena. As a result it is Preethi and Neelamani that look into every aspect from finances to staff welfare. With staff strength of just over 320 this is without a doubt a daunting task for the duo. "Neela looks into every detail, from arranging their leave to making sure their meals are appropriate," says Preethi adding that at times Neelamani is perceived as 'madam' and at times as the 'mother'.

The staff who are away from their homes are provided with hostel facilities, meals, health care and various other comforts down to personal care, and at times the welfare of their parents as well. There are instances where business takes Preethi and Neelamani away on travel for long periods and at such times they have little doubt that the store remains in good hands. "They are able to take care of everything but why would they do so? It is because we treat them well. To our best staff we have even offered our own land and built houses for them." It is their belief that the level and commitment of staff is a reflection of the values the two entrepreneurs have upheld themselves. "Wherever they go from here they will be able to find employment as they are recognised anywhere," says Neelamani.

Aside from an unfailing commitment, teamwork and business sense, Preethi reflects on another aspect of their success. In that, each decision made, be it about staff or selection of a product are all made mutually. "I have realized that the decision made through discussing with each other is always the strongest and proven to be right time and again," says Preethi thoughtfully. Their mutually beneficial relationship is such that when one becomes agitated the other compensates by keeping a cool head! "It is on these strengths that we have come this far," she adds.

As they set forth with their landmark store Preethi and Neelamani are more than satisfied to remain in the retail industry. "This is enough for us," they say and they urge others to strive for success. "You can reach this level. Let the whole world know what Sri Lanka can do."

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