

“Women always put themselves after everybody else, but you should put your vision first”: Mageswari, lead entrepreneur with The/Nudge Institute, on selling eyeglasses in Tamil Nadu

Rollo Romig

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Rollo Romig: Can you start by introducing yourself and your work?

Mageswari: My name is Mageswari, and I am the lead entrepreneur with The/Nudge eyeglasses project in Tamil Nadu. I do not have previous experience in sales; I have worked mostly in training. I worked selling menstrual cups to SHG [Self-Help Group] members. That was a program created by an American NGO.

Rollo Romig: What attracted you to taking this job?

Mageswari: I need money! I have two girls. I did some part-time teaching jobs before the pandemic, but I've been having a difficult time getting work since the pandemic because I have no teaching background. I have financial struggles, so I am willing to take up any job and do it. My first attraction to any job is to earn money, and second comes everything else. My spouse is also a teacher. He also has only a part-time job since COVID, so he does not work on a regular basis. One of my daughters is studying for her MBBS [Bachelor of Medicine / Bachelor of Surgery], so there are many financial needs that I need to meet.



I only get ₹4,000 [US\$50] for the training work that I do. The job is very limited, and I only get to work two months each year. I always grab that opportunity, but the earnings for a training are at a maximum of ₹5,000 per month, which is not enough, as it happens only two months a year. That is where I learned about this opportunity. The fact that it's a salary model, where there is ₹11,000, is very attractive. At the same time, there is an incentive where I'll be able to earn more money.

Rollo Romig: It seems like you took to it very quickly because they immediately made you the lead entrepreneur. What do you think has made you so good at this?



Mageswari: I am generally very good at handling and engaging with people. It's a service-based job where you get an opportunity to also serve. Although it's an entrepreneurship model, where I get to earn money, it is also for the benefit of the people, which makes it interesting to me. My people skills are a positive trait that have helped me work well in this role and move from a normal entrepreneur to a lead entrepreneur.

Rollo Romig: It seems you're also good at convincing people. What do you think is most effective when trying to convince people that they should get reading glasses?



Mageswari: I convince people by telling them that these are very good spectacles. I also say this is very affordable. I explain that when they go to a private hospital or a private optician, they might need to pay ₹800 or ₹700 for very good reading glasses, but I offer the same glasses for only ₹300. People's first thought is that ₹300 is very affordable. That's what I understand from my experience talking to people. Very few people say that it's not affordable, and these are very rural areas.

I ask them, I note down their response, and then I go back to them again, so that they have time to be prepared with the money. That is a convenience that I offer. When we go to shops, we get an opportunity to look, think, and then come back. We often go a second time to buy, so I go to them a second time. By that time, they can be prepared with the money. They feel that this is beneficial for them, and they feel that real care is taken and a real effort is made to get them these glasses.



I also speak about how the NGO partners with Aravind Hospital. This is one way of convincing people because Aravind Eye Hospital is very popular in the rural areas of Tamil Nadu. Aravind Hospital does a camp in most villages. They also offer glasses for ₹300. They do not do door-to-door service. They host camps in a particular place, and people who are aware of this camp happening go there, get their screening done, and get their glasses.

I tell customers that when there is a camp happening by Aravind, there are many people who are ignorant about it. They do not know. They are not aware that this camp is happening in this particular village, and many people miss that opportunity. I explain that Aravind has partnered with our NGO to make sure that if any people have missed the camp, they can still get glasses from us. I am here to provide the door-to-door service.

In addition, I myself use spectacles. Sometimes, people look at the glasses and say the frame is not good, or that they want a different color. For first-time users, especially, it can be very difficult seeing themselves in spectacles. They're uncomfortable and worried about others looking at them strangely. For tackling that issue, I say, Look at me. I am wearing them. How do I look? They say it looks good on me, so it might look good on them as well. That works. I also explain that the frames are plastic, which will not hurt or leave marks like steel, and they will not damage easily.



Using experiential tools helps really well, too, like having people try on the glasses and then read the newspaper, or identify different pulses, or thread a needle. It's a real-time, live experience

for them. That gives a direct glimpse that this is good, this is helping them. In cases where they are indecisive, when they can try the glasses and read a newspaper quickly or do thread and needle work very quickly, they'll decide to buy.

I understand that there are three categories of people I need to convince. The first is people who have no money at the moment, and say, maybe later. In that case, I make it very convenient for them by going to them again on the second day. They feel that shows a real concern for them, and they know I'm here to bring them a service, so they consider this opportunity.

The second is people who care about how they look. For first-time users, especially, I need different colors and different frames. They might worry that they look strange. For all these concerns, I use the strategy of showing them that I, too, wear spectacles, and then they become comfortable seeing me, and that is a real experience.


The third category are those who doubt their need or doubt the benefit of the glasses, for which the real-time experiences help. Sometimes those people have a notion that in hospitals they are checked properly, and they prefer clinics where there is a clear authority. All of a sudden, they have somebody coming door to door, giving them ready-made glasses; they can't accept that. In this situation, my strategy is to test them and say that I'll come the next day with the glasses. The next day, I bring glasses that are ready-made, but they think I've put in an order and had them made by clinics, and I am bringing the glasses from there.

Rollo Romig: Do people understand that there are different kinds of glasses, and that distance glasses are much more complicated?

Mageswari: No, people do not understand. Even if you try to bring that awareness to that, they doubt it because they have this notion that in clinics, everything is prepared with extreme care, even reading glasses. They do not know these are ready-made glasses. It's difficult for them to digest all that.

After the first month, I was able to understand what strategy I should use to convince different people and what type of concerns different people have. In some places, I'll take one day to deliver the glasses. In other places, I distribute ready-made.

Rollo Romig: When someone told you, I don't need to buy them now, I can get them later, you said to her, Women always put themselves after everybody else, but you should put your vision first. Can you explain what you meant?

 **Mageswari:** In India, most of the women, especially in rural areas, take care of their family, do household chores, and give the least priority to themselves and their health. When I go to women, what I do as a woman myself is I speak from their position. I note how important it is to take care of our health, as only then will we be able to take care of others. I share examples of how I have been living all these years, always considering my partner and then my kids, and then my extended family members, and last, finally, comes my own health. I tell them that three years before I got tested and bought reading glasses for myself, I had my father and my partner tested and made sure they had glasses.

When you speak about that, women get a feeling that their reality is heard, and there is somebody who is listening. It's an emotional, sentimental approach to convincing them that their health has

to be taken care of, and they are very much convinced. They start thinking, Yes, I need to take care of myself; only then will I be able to take care of my family. Along with this, I tell them that I've also heard that not curing your presbyopia can lead to other problems, like increasing your stress.

Rollo Romig: When did you start wearing reading glasses?

Mageswari: Three years ago. I still remember the day when I first recognized that I have a near-vision problem. I was about to deposit money in the bank, and the sunlight was so bright, but I couldn't read the account number. I had to ask a boy who was on the road to read the account number for me. It was a very traumatic experience for me. I felt, I am getting old; I am aging. What to do now? Emotionally, I was sad and also traumatized.

After that, I bought ₹90 reading glasses. I wore them, but I came to understand that for ₹90, maybe these were not the best option. I just bought them from a random shop, without proper testing, so I didn't even know which power I needed to be using. Shortly after that, I met an old friend of 20 years who was facing the same problem, and both of us went to a shop together. We went to an optician and bought reading glasses for ₹1,200. I have been using those glasses ever since, even now, after I've entered into this role.

I have a very personal connection to this job. I am able to relate to why I should be providing this service to people because I myself have had a traumatic experience around vision. That's what I want to share with everyone.

Rollo Romig: I noticed today that it was mostly women who were getting screened. Is that typical?



Mageswari: Yes, most of the time it's women who get their eyes screened. The main reason for that is that most of the men are laborers, so they are usually working. They work in different manufacturing companies, and they come home late, around 7:00 or 7:30 PM. Most of the time, when I do screenings, they are not at home. I have had four to five incidences where women came, bought glasses, had a good experience, and then brought their partners on a different day.

Ankur Sanghai [head of the entrepreneur model for the Insight program at The/Nudge]: This is a very industrial area. We have men go to factories, and that's why they are not available during the whole day. If it were a farming area, like they have in Uttar Pradesh, whenever males come back from the farm to their house in the afternoon, they're home for three or four hours, let's say, from 11:30 AM to 3:30 PM.

We want to be on the scene when most people are home, so we tried to go at night, at 7:00 PM and 8:00 PM. We encountered two things. One was that it was a little too late to visit someone's home. Sometimes, in North India, when men come at night, some of them start drinking, and you don't want to get into all that stuff. We also tried mornings, at 6:00 AM. That works sometimes, but that doesn't work all the time because they are often in a hurry to get to their jobs.



With this model, we are trying to show that for these labor-dominated areas, if you convince the women first, the men will automatically come. The idea is that if you convince 20%-30% of the population's eligible patients to wear glasses, they will hopefully end up coaxing the other 70% to purchase.

It becomes the norm. If my neighbor has bought it and she is wearing it, and she is feeling very happy about it, I can, too. Normally, these village folks gather together a lot as a community to talk. News will spread, benefits will spread.

Rollo Romig: What was the training you got for this job like?

Mageswari: I studied biology, so it was easy for me to grasp things quickly. A trainer came for two days, and they provided a class on basic anatomy of the eyes, how to do vision training, distance-vision training, and near-vision training, and how to understand non-refractive eye conditions like cataracts, pterygium, and other diseases. It was basically a classroom training for two days. It was difficult to learn the words and terms, like bifocal glass and single lens. These were all very new for me.

Then, all the entrepreneurs, including me, had field training for four days where we went into the field, did vision screening, and started speaking about what we learned. It became familiar and convenient. Then the terms became familiar. Vision screening steps became very familiar.

Then we started selling glasses. We went in the field for door-to-door screening. Henna accompanied me during my fieldwork to observe what mistakes were happening. Then we are left alone to do the screening. We have regular visits from Henna to ensure that the processes are being maintained properly. I improved a lot, and I started giving training to the other entrepreneurs. I was able to grasp things quickly, then sell more glasses.

Within two weeks, I was able to sell a lot of glasses, do screenings, and reach many people. I was then assigned to give field training to three other entrepreneurs. All of them came to my location. When I also started giving training, I learned even more. Sales and training happened very simultaneously. That was my learning process.

Rollo Romig: Did you feel like there were any shortcomings in the training? Was there anything that you wish you had learned, but you didn't learn?

Mageswari: Initially, on my first day, I was worried whether it was possible for me to learn everything. I was confused about whether it was possible to reach out to people and ask them to explain things. Once the field training started, I became very comfortable. I understood that for this particular program, the vision screening we learn is enough, and we have learned more than enough.

Rollo Romig: Sometimes you go door to door, and sometimes you gather people from an area in one place, like you did today. Can you tell me about these approaches, and how you decide when to use which approach?



Mageswari: The approach that I generally use when I focus on a particular area is that I look for friends or friends of friends who are living there, or who are natives of that particular area. I prepare the day or the night before by calling them, telling them that I am coming with the eyeglasses, and asking them to please spread the word. I also request that they ask people to gather in a particular place.

In areas where I do not have any connections or any friends, I randomly go to different houses, door to door. I go to one house, I speak to them, and I try to convince them. Then, they spread the word, and people from nearby houses join them in that same place.

Rollo Romig: Is it difficult to go door to door and talk to strangers like that?

Mageswari: It is more convenient for me when I can gather people in one place. It may be only 20 or 25 people, but I save a lot of time and energy by having someone in the community use their connections to have people from five or six different houses gather at the same house where I can then speak. I am able to save energy and time for convincing people.



Another benefit of gathering people together is that I sell more glasses because one person will influence another person to purchase. I have always observed this pattern. If one person buys the glasses, another person will feel that they can also buy them because it is trustworthy.

If I go door to door, I could only cover maybe six houses in a day. Every time, I have to explain everything all over again. It takes a lot of time. The end result could be that people say no because they fear they will be the only person who is buying the glasses. They won't know that their neighbor has already bought them, and it would be difficult for them to believe me if I told them they had. Gathering people from six to seven houses in one place always helps me sell more glasses. My approach is limited. I'll talk to five to six houses at once, but not more than that. Then I move to a similar area in the same location and gather people from another six houses in a different house.

Ankur Sanghai: It depends a little on your personality. One of my entrepreneurs in the field does the same thing. He tried to train other general entrepreneurs to use this gathering method, but they could not replicate it. You need a lot of confidence, too. Some people will get nervous in front of seven or eight people. It depends person to person.

Mageswari: Another reason why we need so much confidence in this model is that when gathering people in one location, yes, one person buying glasses can influence many people, but one person expressing a negative reaction can just as easily influence other people. One person might ask, How did this lady become an eye technician? Then everyone else has a negative reaction. I have stopped gathering too many people together at one place because we lose sales count when the crowds are too big. Sometimes, we're not able to convince anyone because the negative influence is stronger than the positive influence.

It's risky, in a way. It requires a knack to understand what kind of crowd you have. I talk a lot to people, and somehow, they feel like I am very good at this. That's what I do.

Two things that always help me sell a lot of glasses. One, I talk a lot. I convince people that I'm good at this. Two, my connections and my friends help. Through connections, I get into new communities.

Rollo Romig: In a factory community, it can be difficult to reach men. Are there other groups that are difficult to reach in particular communities? Are there any groups that are more of a challenge to reach than others?

Mageswari: Regarding religion and caste, or reaching marginalized communities, no, I have not felt any such difficulties reaching a specific community. I have reached out to all religions, Christians, Hindus, and all castes, I have not faced any difficulty. The only problem is that when people are all employed in different companies, it takes time for them to be available at home. In very limited cases, sometimes women want to buy, but they do not have money, or they need to get permission from their spouse or their son. In that case, marriage and patriarchy are obstacles.

It's not that I cannot reach them— I can— but it's quite difficult to convince them because they don't have the option to decide on their own.

Rollo Romig: In terms of spreading the word, are there any other ways that you spread the word to people, aside from going door to door and reaching out to your network?



Mageswari: I put the information in my WhatsApp status, which is seen by approximately 150 of my contacts. That is one thing. There is also a panchayat-related WhatsApp group wherein there are members from different panchayats [village councils]. I broadcast some messages through these WhatsApp groups.

Then, when I go to different functions, I also talk about the program and about my work with relatives, and those relatives will be able to reach out to other communities.

Rollo Romig: You have both regular reading glasses and bifocals, where the top part is just a clear lens. What is more popular?

Mageswari: Bifocals are the most popular. Most people prefer bifocal glasses, in my experience. Very rarely, people also ask for a single lens in their reading glasses. One problem is that single-lens reading glasses have to be worn low on the nose. That is very uncomfortable for many people. Bifocal glasses can be worn in the same way we wear normal glasses. They don't have to be taken on and off. No headaches. Comfort is the main reason why bifocals are preferred.

Most of the time, even people who do not have a distance vision problem, and only have near-vision problems, prefer to have bifocal glasses so they can wear them all the time. They don't have to remove them, or wear them on their nose. Very rarely do people buy single lenses, but people whose jobs require a lot of near-vision work, like teachers and tailors, often prefer single lens glasses. For instance, I met with two teachers who wanted to buy glasses. They didn't have a distance-vision problem, only a near-vision problem, and they chose to buy single lens glasses because they're not going to put them on all the time; they only need to wear them for corrections and other paperwork. These cases are rare, and most times, bifocals are preferred.

Rollo Romig: How is the supply? Do you always have the glasses that you need when you need them?

Mageswari: Yes, there is enough stock.

Rollo Romig: On an average day, how many people do you screen and how many pairs of glasses do you sell?



Mageswari: Initially, for the first few days, it was two or three sales per day. But after two to three days, I was able to understand what strategy has to be taken. Since then, I have had days where I screened the 20 members and sold 10 or 12 pairs of glasses. I've also had days when I screened 12 to 15 members, and then sold 6 or 7 pairs of glasses. On average, I'd say I sell around five pairs of glasses per day.

Rollo Romig: Around how many hours each day do you work?

Mageswari: Five hours.

Rollo Romig: On average, you sell one pair per hour?

Mageswari: Yes.

Rollo Romig: The glasses are priced at ₹300. Does that seem like a good price point to you? Do people seem happy with that price point?



Mageswari: I have two opinions on that. Yes, ₹300 is a very affordable price. Most people are ready and willing to pay ₹300, and they feel very comfortable paying that sum. They understand that it would cost more when buying outside. But in certain cases, older people, or single people who don't have any other family members, might want glasses, but are not able to afford them.

In such cases, I feel that if I could give them the glasses for free, it would be really good. Sometimes it hurts me when I see elderly people trying to somehow gather ₹300 from somewhere to pay. It really hurts. Otherwise, for most people, ₹300 is very affordable.

Rollo Romig: Is there anything that you don't have now, but that you think would be helpful for you in order to sell more glasses?



Mageswari: Two things. First, it would be really helpful if we had some kind of video ads. We currently have banners and posters, which I distribute across different villages I visit with friends and to people who come for screenings. If there were a video that explains the program, that I could share on social media or WhatsApp, it would be very helpful for me to sell more glasses.

Secondly, if there were testimonials taken from people who bought glasses, and if we had a video testimonial from people who have bought glasses and feel good about them, I could share that too, which would also increase my sales.

Rollo Romig: Speaking of testimonials, are there any stories you can share about someone who bought glasses from you, and it made a big difference for them?

Mageswari: There are many stories from the ground, but two stories come to my mind. The first one is an Anganwadi teacher. An Anganwadi is a school run by the government for kids who are two or three years old. I sold glasses to the Anganwadi teacher. Whenever we've met or whenever she's seen me since then, she always says, I'll pray for you. She speaks with a lot of gratitude, which makes me happy.

The second story is that one day, I went to visit a home and met an old grandma who insisted on buying reading glasses. I did not offer her glasses because she had severe cataracts. I asked her to consult a doctor, and I referred her to an optometrist to confirm. She said, Okay, then consider screening my son.

She called her son, who was a politician and was occupied with a lot of work related to the election. He came, and after testing, he also bought reading glasses. The interesting part is that earlier that morning, her son was telling her, I can't see anything. I need to enter a lot of voter IDs to the list, but it's so difficult. After he bought the reading glasses, he was very happy, and he said to her, This is just the thing that I wanted. I was just thinking about buying glasses, and here they are, right in front of me. It's just like my father brought them to me. His father had already passed away.

That same day, via this politician, I was able to connect with many people. He referred me to many of his friends and to other communities. He gave me contacts in other villages, which also helped me.

Ankur Sanghai: Why do you think it is easy for you to convince people, but some of the other entrepreneurs are struggling to make these types of connections?

Mageswari: I have had a lot of opportunities in the past to connect with a network of people, so I make use of that network in this work. A lot of these entrepreneurs are very new, starting from scratch. That might be why it's taking a little more time for them to improve. I also see a lack of planning. I plan a lot for what has to be done over the week.

Ankur Sanghai: Your networking ability helps, but if I put you in a totally new scene, where you have no record or connections, do you think you will be able to sell glasses?

Mageswari: I will try to convince people by sharing my own experiences of how I started wearing glasses.

Ankur Sanghai: If you needed to go out and hire, what would you look for in entrepreneurs?

Mageswari: I would follow the field selection model, which we already tried, where I'd be able to understand if the person talks a lot, or if they feel they can talk to people easily. They have to be very talkative. That is one trait that I'd seek.

I would also look for people who do not get angry easily. They have to have a smiling face. They have to always be trying to convince others. We get different responses from people, and sometimes these responses are very negative or hurtful. We cannot get demotivated. The next day, we must bring the same positive mindset. That anger cannot be there if you want to sell.

Think about how we feel when we go to a doctor. Even if a doctor is very talented, I only visit a doctor if he's very approachable, if he speaks to me nicely. This is similar since this is also a

medical field. People only trust us if we are very approachable in our behavior and nature. It matters how we speak, how we smile.

The third aspect I would consider is the person's need for money. Even if we get demotivated, we can motivate ourselves because we are in need of money. That is the third trait that I'd be choosing.

Lastly, I think that, in general, we need people who are older than 30– people who are in need, who have family responsibilities, and need to take care of them. They'll do the work very sincerely.

Ankur Sanghai: Are there any clusters where I can find people who have these traits? We want this program to scale across India. One Mageswari cannot scale across India. We need you help to create 100 more Mageswaris. We need you to train others.

Mageswari: Yes. I suggest finding trainers, or BRPs [block resource persons], people who work in the education system, as a link between schools and the district office.

Ankur Sanghai: Do you agree that this is a job where ladies can work for just four or five hours, and then handle other household responsibilities during the remaining part of the day, and still make good money?

Mageswari: Yes, definitely. Maybe the field training and initial 15 days will be slow, but selling four pairs per day is possible. I already sell six or seven pairs of glasses per day; that is always my aim. Four is easily achievable.

Rollo Romig: Thank you so much for your time and your insights.

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*Rollo Romig is the manager of Solutions Insights Lab. He is the author of *I Am on the Hit List: A Journalist's Murder and the Rise of Autocracy in India*, which was named a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize.*

** This interview has been edited and condensed.*