

“I am able to sell more glasses quickly when I gather people in one place”: Nithya on building trust and boosting sales as a new entrepreneur with The/Nudge Institute

Rollo Romig

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Rollo Romig: Nithya, please tell me about this work you've been doing.

Nithya: I go to different areas to do vision screening for people in villages mostly, and give them glasses, if they have any near-vision problem. My experience is really good. I began in June.

Rollo Romig: Did you have any sales experience before this?

Nithya: No, but I have experience in the field. I worked as a coordinator for the NREGA [Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act] scheme on the 100 Days Work Scheme, where I collected data of people who work in the field. I ensured that people work on time, and get the amount on time. I basically worked as a coordinator in my previous field experience.

Rollo Romig: Tell me about the training that you received for this work.

Nithya: I received training on different kinds of eye diseases, the difference between myopia and presbyopia, and how presbyopia can occur in people around age 35. It was a two-day classroom training.

Rollo Romig: Did you also receive some sales training?

Nithya: Yes. Henna initially helped me in the field, and then as a team, Mageshwari also helped give field training on sales.

Rollo Romig: Was it difficult to learn these things? What were the challenges?

Nithya: Initially, it was really difficult for me. All the terms were very new because I do not have a background in vision screening, so it was very difficult in the first month. It was a bit difficult to go door-to-door and convince people what I'm trying to do, and the awareness I'm trying to give.

People always have different notions. Sometimes, they would be very negative, and it was very difficult to get them to buy glasses. Later on, I was able to quickly sell glasses and also convince people using different strategies, but initially, it was very difficult.

Rollo Romig: What were some of the strategies you learned? What changed?



Nithya: Initially, it was quite difficult, but now I have reached a point where I know what strategy has to be used. The strategy, or the approach, that changed in myself is the way I speak. I became a little bit more open in speaking to people. I speak a lot about what I'm trying to do, where I come from, about the NGO, and about Aravind, which is very popular among people. I spend so much time talking to people before starting the vision screening. That approach has helped me a lot. It also helped me build a relationship with the person, before just randomly doing a screening.

Rollo Romig: Was there anything you didn't learn in the training that would have been helpful to you?

Nithya: On top of all the classroom and sales trainings we received, the only other training I required is to have some training on how to sell the glasses fast. It's not possible now, because the sales training has already happened. That's something that is needed in the training, but there's no option for that. Not something that needs to be trained, but I wish I could have some magic kind of a thing which would help me sell many more glasses. It's a very utopian idea, in a perfect world.

There are situations in which when I get feedback, like people asking me to give them an eye drop, or maybe a medicine for a disease, or something for some particular eye condition. If I was actually an optometrist or ophthalmologist, I could give them what they ask for. There are definitely limitations to what I can do. This does not actually answer the question about what other training has to be done. These are all random things coming to my mind, that's all.

Rollo Romig: It is a challenge, because there's only so much you can do. When people have a negative reaction, what is that usually about? What is their hesitation?

  **Nithya:** Firstly, I might get some negative reactions from people. Initially, what happens when I go to a particular house, door-to-door, they'll respond, "How is it even possible that you come door-to-door, selling glasses or giving ready-made glasses?" It's very difficult for them to accept that. They're only used to getting glasses from outside the home, or maybe in camps, when doctors are sitting there.

Some random person coming in is very difficult for them to accept. They're not very aware about reading glasses, or ready-made glasses. Sometimes they won't be ready to even do vision screening, saying they don't want or trust it.

Then, very recently, I have not had that kind of negative reaction, mostly because I try to talk so much, and then talk about Aravind and the NGO, The/Nudge Institute. Slowly I have come out of that situation, but initially, I had this negative reaction a lot. In some areas when I go frequently to an area on consecutive days, like every day in a week, messages get spread around very fast.

↗ At the same time, people also feel that I'm trying to sell glasses and make use of this area so much, and they somehow trust that. In such cases, I go to one village, and take one day for that village, and then go to the next one, and after two days go back to the same village again, and people are now waiting. They tell others that a lady is coming to give tests in two days, so there is a demand there. It takes one day to nudge people to believe that this is not something that is easily available.

Secondly, some people might say that ₹300 [US\$3.43] is okay, but they expect to get it for free. It's not because they do not have money, but they expect to get it for free.

Another negative reaction might be about fashion. They say, "I need a better style. I don't need this black color. I need a different color, or different frames." They're okay with buying glasses, but they need a different frame.

Rollo Romig: How often does it happen that people want a different frame?

Nithya: It's mostly with people aged 35 to 45. These people prefer to have different glasses or different frames, but they're okay buying these glasses for ₹300. They're fine with this, but they also ask if we have a different design or different frames.

Rollo Romig: Why do you think some people expect the glasses to be free?

Nithya: In some cases, if a family is very poor, they wish to get it for free, because financially, they cannot afford it. Some families earn an average amount. They have constant work and all that, but still it's a behavioral thing. If they can get it for free, then they're very happy. It's just that. If we try to convince them for another 10 or 15 minutes, then they'll buy glasses. The first thing might be, they want it for free. They always want to get it for free.

Rollo Romig: The price is ₹300 a pair. Do you think it's a good price? Is that the right price for most people?

⌚ **Nithya:** Yes, ₹300 is an affordable price. If I do not have the possibility of selling more glasses in a village, I shift to a different village. Around 30% of people in a village are generally not able to afford glasses.

Rollo Romig: For around 30% the price is too high, and for the rest it's good?

Nithya: Yes.

Rollo Romig: You sell both bifocals and regular reading glasses, yes?

Nithya: Yes.

Rollo Romig: Which is more popular?

Nithya: Bifocal.

Rollo Romig: Why is that?

 **Nithya:** Single lens glasses have to be worn on the nose. That's quite difficult for people, and otherwise, it has to be removed if not in use. It's quite difficult for people, uncomfortable also. Bifocal glasses can be worn any time, even if they're not reading, or if they're not in an activity which requires near vision. They can use it all the time. It makes it very comfortable for people, in terms of usability.

Second thing is that bifocal glasses are also fashionable. Some people also complain that while wearing single lens glasses, they feel very strange, especially for first-time users, because it's the complete lens. It feels very uncomfortable for them.

Sometimes they're scared also. This happens with some first-time users. They wear it for the first time, and we say that it has to be worn on the nose, but they'll put it on again the other way. Then, they'll look straight ahead, and see everything becoming enlarged, and they become scared. This uncomfortability is the main reason why bifocal is preferred over single lens.

Rollo Romig: You're usually selling door-to-door, like cold calls, right?

Nithya: Yes.

Rollo Romig: Is there any other way you're spreading the word about glasses?

Nithya: There are two approaches that I use. One is mostly door-to-door. Second is when I gather people at one place, which happens according to the locations. In rural areas where the number of houses are spread out, I go door-to-door because it's also difficult to gather all of them, unless we have a connection or friends from that particular village. In those cases, I go door-to-door. If it's a very populated area, I try to gather people in one place. It may be beneath a tree, or maybe any house near any public common areas.

Rollo Romig: Is that helpful to have everyone in one place? Are there other advantages to that?

Nithya: Door-to-door works in some cases, but I am able to sell more glasses quickly when I gather people in one place.

Rollo Romig: In some places, you're covering a lot of distance. It's a big area. Is it difficult to get around? Is it okay for you with transport? Do you usually go around on your own scooter?

Nithya: I don't have a scooter.

Rollo Romig: How do you get around when you have to go to these rural places?

Nithya: I walk, or get a lift.

Rollo Romig: Who gives you a lift?

Nithya: Some random person.

Rollo Romig: So you just ask someone, and then, when you get to the place, you're just walking around door-to-door?

Nithya: Yes.

Rollo Romig: Is that difficult?



Nithya: Yes, it is definitely difficult for two reasons. One is time. There's a lot of time wasted in travel. If I can reach a particular location in half an hour, it's good, but without a bike, it might take one and a half hours, because I have to get a lift. It's also not very safe with some people who might offer a lift. In two ways, it's difficult. I want to buy my own scooter, after two months when I save money from this.

Rollo Romig: Do you always have the right supply? Do you have all the glasses that you need when you need them?

Nithya: Yes.

Rollo Romig: On an average day when you're out, how many people do you screen, and how many glasses do you sell?

Nithya: I average 10 screenings a day, and 4 sales a day.

Rollo Romig: Is that enough to make it worthwhile?



Nithya: From my experience in the last three weeks, I'm sure I'm capable of selling more glasses, and also doing more screenings. The main challenge I face in villages is that many of them go out for work. It's the 100 Days' Work scheme [a social-welfare employment program]. Gents also leave for work in the morning. Even if I reach a village around 10:00 AM, in some cases, I'll have to wait for people to come. Sometimes I'll have to wait till 5:00 or 6:00 PM to complete 12 screenings. The main challenge is people's availability. If people are available, then I can sell more. I'm sure I'm capable of selling more glasses, but this is the challenge I face. That's why the number of screenings and sales are less.

Ankur Sanghai [head of the entrepreneur model for the Insight program at The/Nudge]: When are people not available? Are there ways to come before that, or after? What are the pros and cons?

Nithya: In my own village, I have done that. I plan to go at 8:00 in the morning, so that I can screen people before they leave for work, and also, sometimes in the evening after 5:00 or 6:00 PM. In other villages, I have to travel and then go back to my village, so it takes time. Sundays are also a preferable option, but it's also the only day I get to spend with my kids when they are not in school, so I also prefer to be at home then.

Ankur Sanghai: Will a vehicle help in that situation?

Nithya: Yes, it will help.

Ankur Sanghai: Again, what are the timings when the people are not available?

Nithya: 8:30 AM to 5:30 PM is the time when people are not available.

Ankur Sanghai: How much time are you devoting to do the 10 screenings?

Nithya: Generally, I travel back around 6:30 PM from a village. Today I came early, but otherwise, I come closer to afternoon, so that I have more time towards the evening. Otherwise, if I come early in the morning, there will be nobody except people in the 50 to 70 age range, for whom these glasses would not be very beneficial. Secondly, sales also will be less. I get sales only if I come towards evening, in the afternoon to 6:30 PM.

Ankur Sanghai: How much time?

Nithya: It takes four hours. I arrive around 11:30 AM till 6:30 PM. In between, I take a break for lunch that I bring.

Ankur Sanghai: This day from 11:30 AM to 6:30 does not include travel time, right?

Nithya: I arrive at 11:30 AM.

Ankur Sanghai: There's another 30 minutes, or one hour of travel time?

Nithya: Yes.

Ankur Sanghai: Should we start at 10:30 AM?

Nithya: Yes. I start at 10:30 AM, actually.

Ankur Sanghai: What time do you arrive back home?

Nithya: Around 7pm.

Rollo Romig: Currently, are you reaching more women than men?

Nithya: Mostly women, because men work.

Rollo Romig: What do people who buy glasses find them most useful for?

Nithya: For tailoring, especially for women, then also for farming. Some women also say it helps while cooking.

Rollo Romig: Can you tell me about someone you sold glasses to who found it very useful?

Nithya: I have two stories to share. One is from a nearby village, from a tailor who bought glasses from me. It was really helpful for that tailor. Another story is from a woman in my own village. First, after the screening but before buying the glasses, we decided what power she needed. Before that, she took a lot of time to decide whether to buy or not. [I helped her] first by using a

needle and thread, to let her see if she is able to knot it. Later, she returned home from my screening with the glasses, and then did her stitching using the tailoring machine. She then came back and bought the glasses. She just wanted to confirm first if it was really helpful.

 It wouldn't have been possible for that lady to reconfirm if it's really helpful for her or not, if this had been done in a shop. It's only because I was able to go to her that she had the flexibility to take the glasses to her home, do the stitching, have a live experience, and then choose to buy or not. That's so much more control for that person in buying that particular product.

Rollo Romig: Aside from a scooter, is there anything else that you need, or wish you had, that would help you sell more?

Nithya: Apart from the scooter, I also feel that sometimes people have a negative reaction when they see me with a plastic carry bag which I use to hold things. So I ordered a nice bag, which is a bit more standardized. Village people also have a more positive reaction towards the work I do.

Ankur Sanghai: When we started the first pilot way back, we gave a bag to the first two entrepreneurs. After that, I started getting a feeling that people were thinking of this as a job. In a job, you get a bag, you get this, you get that. They started expecting things. Then I wanted to make it very clear that this is an entrepreneurship, and you need to get your own things. A bag is not that expensive for the organization, but at the same time, we want to create that [entrepreneurial] mindset. Then I made a hard stop and said, "I'm not going to give you a bag. I'm already giving you your lab coat, I'm giving you all the stationery and all that to kick off. Arrange a bag for yourself, you know how to do it." People need to start getting into that [entrepreneurial] mindset. Yesterday, I saw Mageshwari had her own stamp with her name and contact number to put on posters and receipts during outreach and sales. Those things show that entrepreneurship mindset. That's what we want to accomplish.

Nithya: Same thing happened with me as well. On my own, I ordered a bag, understanding that this is needed.

Rollo Romig: Is it necessary to use their own imagination about what they need, and what will be helpful?

Ankur Sanghai: Needs can be different. If I provide something, I'm imposing my choices on them, or my thoughts on them.

Rollo Romig: Each environment is different, too. Ankur, do you have questions that you want to ask?

Ankur Sanghai: How did you choose this village?

Nithya: Initially, I started with my own village and nearby villages. Two challenges I faced were that people in my village already knew what I learned and my educational background. It was difficult for me to convince them how I suddenly became an eye technician.

Secondly, it was very difficult for me because they always had excuses about money. They say, "I'll give you the money next week, or next two weeks later," which was very difficult for me. In July, I thought about experimenting in a random new village, and that was successful. I was able to

succeed because people didn't know me, so that gave me a lot of freedom to explain things. Secondly, I got cash right away.

Ankur Sanghai: It's a transaction. It's no more a friendship.

Nithya: Yes. This is working. In the last two weeks, I have sold four glasses every day. I've learned that strange and random villages work for me best.

Ankur Sanghai: How did you start in this village? How was day zero, day one? We've given you a process, but I want to understand what you're doing.

Nithya: In this village, I chose randomly to go to some house, start screening, and start talking to them. Then, sometimes through the particular house I visit, I then try to understand if there are any people from whom I can get more contacts, or more connections to people in the same village. This is the process that I use.

Rollo Romig: Thank you so much for taking the time.

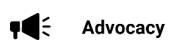
Nithya: Thanks. I am very happy that I got this opportunity.

Ankur Sanghai: I hope you're able to buy a vehicle very soon, so that this pain of traveling also goes away.

Rollo Romig: How much does a scooter cost?

Ankur Sanghai: ₹20,000 [US\$175.41] second hand. I've proposed to a department that they provide soft loans to them to buy inventory, and also for vehicles. I'm requesting the department to provide around ₹100,000 [US\$1,143] in soft loans. If that works out, then new entrepreneurs won't have this issue.

ICON LEGEND



*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.*