



“After getting positive feedback from one fisherman, I sold around 20 pairs of glasses to 20 other fishermen”: Padmavati of The/Nudge Institute on word-of-mouth, networks, and earning as an entrepreneur

Rollo Romig

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Rollo Romig: Can you start by introducing yourself and telling me about the work you do?

Padmavati: My name is Padmavati, and I'm an eyeglasses entrepreneur with The/Nudge in Tamil Nadu. I started this work two months ago.

Rollo Romig: Why did you take this work?

Padmavati: I have a family, and I need to take care of them. This gives me financial support. I have financial problems.

Rollo Romig: Had you ever done sales before?

Padmavati: No.

Rollo Romig: Can you tell me about the training you got to start doing this work?

Padmavati: I received two days of classroom training, which included the theory parts like understanding what presbyopia is, learning about different types of diseases, and learning how to screen. Then I had classroom training on KoboToolbox. Post that, I had sales training and field training, which were conducted by Mageswari and Henna.

Rollo Romig: Was there anything that you didn't learn in the training that you wished you had learned?

Padmavati: No, nothing where I feel that some other training has to be given.

Rollo Romig: When you first started selling, how did it go?

Padmavati: Initially, I was not able to sell many glasses. I was very new to on-field work, as I did not have previous field experience, but I was able to quickly grasp and sell glasses after about one month.

One important thing to know is that I was also going through a very difficult mental and emotional situation that kept me stuck in my home. I had financial problems, too. I had to take care of my kids, so I also had a gap in my work because I was taking care of my kids.

Now my youngest daughter is studying in the 5th standard, so I'm in a position to go out and work. I got this opportunity at the right time, as I wished to start working again. This work relieves me emotionally because it gives me an opportunity to meet and talk to many people, which is fulfilling in many ways. That was there from the beginning of the work. Although I was not very good at selling initially, the work was satisfying for me.

Rollo Romig: How did you get better at selling? What did you learn along the way that made you improve?

Padmavati: What changed from the initial stage to right now is the way I speak. Initially, since I did not have field experience, I needed to change the way I approached people. I had difficulties making sales because I had to build my confidence. Now, I am able to become very close with people, to meet and talk to them very freely. I'm so much more confident than I was previously. That made the difference, I believe, in sales.

Rollo Romig: When people hesitate at first about buying glasses? What makes them have questions or doubts?

 **Padmavati:** I do not get many questions about how trustworthy I am. Most of the questions are regarding how these glasses will help. Will my presbyopia vanish soon after I start wearing these glasses? Or, how long will it take to cure my eyes? Or, will it be useful for my cataracts without surgery? These are all the concerns that people raise. They expect more from the spectacles than they provide. I get these types of concerns more than I get negative reactions or questions about trustworthiness.

Rollo Romig: You are mostly going door to door, right? That's how you're selling?

Padmavati: Yes, I mostly sell door to door, but depending on the weather, let's say if it's going to rain or if it's very hot in the afternoons, I will try to gather people at one place. Not many people, but I try to gather members of two or three houses in one place to explain things. Otherwise, it's door to door.

Rollo Romig: How do you get around? Do you have a scooter?

Padmavati: I don't have a scooter. I take the bus, and in very remote locations, I travel by lift [a free ride in someone else's vehicle], or I walk.

Rollo Romig: Do you have any plans to try to get a scooter or a vehicle?

Padmavati: Yes, definitely. I believe that much more can be done if I have a vehicle of my own.

Rollo Romig: On an average day, how many people are you screening and how many glasses are you selling?

Padmavati: On average, I do 10-12 screenings per day, mostly 10, and I sell an average of 4 pairs of glasses per day.

Rollo Romig: Does ₹300 seem like the right price for most people?



Padmavati: I feel ₹300 is a very affordable price, and I get the same feedback from people, especially the younger generation. They also believe that ₹300 is very affordable because they'll have to pay more than that if they have to buy from the outside. Some elderly people say that they cannot afford it. In some areas, where people's family background or financial background is very poor, it's not affordable, but on average, considering all the screenings that I've done and the feedback I've gotten, ₹300 is affordable.

Rollo Romig: Are you selling more to women, more to men, or is it equal?



Padmavati: I sell mostly to ladies, but I also try to reach out to men. In some places, men work as laborers on a shift basis. If they come back home after the morning shift, they are available, and in that case, I try to reach out to them. In more remote villages, men are mostly farmers, or they work on a daily basis in the village, so they'll be available in the evenings, not in the afternoon or morning.

Rollo Romig: Can you tell me about something that happened when you were selling that was a challenge, and how you overcame that challenge?

Padmavati: The main challenge that I faced was in my own village, where people did not trust me because they knew that I did not have a background in this particular sector. They were finding it very difficult to see me as an eye technician, especially to see me doing screenings. I faced very negative comments, which were very demotivating. I overcame that situation by moving my efforts to a different village.

Rollo Romig: Aside from going door to door, are there other ways that you spread the word about the glasses in a village or a locality?

Padmavati: When I go to a new village, sometimes I gather people in public spaces by visiting door to door, but instead of selling to them, I ask them to come to a particular place.

I also take the contacts of people who are part of SHGs [Self-Help Groups] by approaching the SHG leader. I pass along the information that I'm going to do vision screening in this particular village on this particular date, and then they spread the word, and I get easy access to people.

Rollo Romig: Can you tell me a story of someone you sold glasses to, and it was very impactful for them?

 **Padmavati:** I have two stories to share. One is the story of a 55-year-old man who did not have children at home. It was very difficult for him to go outside without help. He needed spectacles, but he couldn't travel alone to get them. When I went to him and gave him the glasses, he started crying. It made me really happy.

Another example is from my own village. I received a lot of negative comments from people, but there were still a few young fishermen who were interested. One fisherman bought glasses from me, and he gave me very positive feedback after using the spectacles. That made me happy because it was my own village, and after receiving so many negative comments, seeing somebody happy felt good. That also helped me get other fishermen to buy glasses from me.

Rollo Romig: What did the fisherman say after he got the glasses?

Padmavati: The fishermen's daily routine is very strange. They go to sea at night, at 2:00 AM. Then, they come back, sleep in the daytime, and go out again. They don't have time to take care of themselves, and they don't have time to go to the hospital. They don't consider eye health to be a serious issue. Presbyopia is not a serious health condition, so they push it aside.

When I went to them and gave them glasses, this one fisherman had just come back from work. He said that if I hadn't come, he wouldn't have bought the glasses because he didn't have time. He was only able to buy those ready-made glasses because they were delivered to him.

Ankur Sanghai [head of the entrepreneur model for the Insight program at The/Nudge]: Do the glasses help him do his job?

Padmavati: Yes, when he does net mending and makes knots. All the fishermen have to do those things daily. Those are near-vision tasks. The glasses are very helpful while mending the nets.

Ankur Sanghai: Has this type of experience led to more sales? Has somebody or some group of people in a village bought glasses, and from that experience, your name spread, and others also bought?

Padmavati: I saw this in my own village. After getting positive feedback from one fisherman, I sold around 20 pairs of glasses to 20 other fishermen. That was possible through positive feedback from one person.

Ankur Sanghai: Do you proactively encourage them to spread the word? When people buy glasses in other villages, do you ask them to please let your friends or network know that I provide this service?

Padmavati: Yes, but it depends on the village. In some villages, word spreads very quickly, in others, not as quickly. I find that word spreads most easily through SHGs and the people who work for the 100 Days Work scheme [a social-welfare employment program]. That is more beneficial than trying to spread the word through groups of people in different professions.

Ankur Sanghai: When you move into a new village, what is the process? How do you start?

Padmavati: When I visit a new village, I consider approaching the Panchayat clerk or somebody from the Panchayat office, and I ask for contacts. I might approach a woman or an SHG leader to contacts as well. That's how I initially start. Then, from contacts, word of mouth.

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

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.*