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He recalls that the iconic image on a Lifebuoy pack — a man holding a trophy in his hand — could not be parsed by the rural audience. “It was seen as a sugar”, says Kakar, “Similarly, while urban India may look at housing as a lifestyle statement, it was an eye opener for me. When during a recent market visit I heard a man living in a modest structure, at best described as a ‘shanty’, speak of his belief that for him his house is like the ‘Mysore Palace.’”

The communication approach is therefore completely different. Indusind relies on audio-visual campaigns in the vernacular language and group meetings as opposed to distributing pamphlets. Says Ganju, “Entertainment (like puppet show, folk dance), mass media cities only creating awareness. A government campaign is one of the best ways to connect with them.” During haats and at religious centres, the bank tries to make the awareness of government-sponsored schemes like the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana and the Fisic Credit Card. Highlights of Axis Bank’s three-year-old campaign include using local entertainment dance and drama forms like Uggar in Punjab or Bharat in Gujarat, slipping in business messages, and more.

The lack of Krishi Pragatishala, an agri expert programme and finally comic books published in multiple languages.

Auto

The financial crisis of 2008 brought a tremendous amount of uncertainty in its wake, but RS Kalsi, executive director — marketing and sales, Maruti Suzuki remembers it differently. Even as he fretted about the implications for Maruti (he was head of sales at the time), a dealer from a small town in Tamil Nadu told him, “Sir, the recession is only for the people who watch business channels and read pink newspapers. In the rural economy, we have good crops, good prices and there is no recession here.” On hindsight, Kalsi believes, “This was the inflection point for us to focus on rural markets.”

The first lessons driven home forcefully was that power dressing was better left to urban areas. On a visit to Asia’s largest mandi at Gondal, Gujarat, Kalsi found himself being given a wide berth by farmers and traders since he was wearing a suit and a tie. He realised that even at the store level, an English speaking tie and blazer wearing sales executive intimidating to his rustic customer. And so Maruti put together a special team of RSDs or resident dealer sales executives, sons of the soil who spoke the local language. They staff Maruti’s emerging market outlets and the company claims to have recruited nearly 10,000 local youth. Kalsi admits, “They may not be good language masters but what’s important is they strike a good chord with the local community.”

The result: encouraging sales. Rural markets account for 55% of February 2015 and account for 34% of the company’s annual sales. Kalsi says with a measure of pride, “We have been able to reach even the smallest villages — today more than 7% of MSIL sales are from villages with less than 200 households.”

In a report on rural markets, Raghuram Devarakonda, managing director, sales and customer services, ACNielsen, suggests, “The first step is to identify and profile the right consumers who may have the means to buy products and services and change the consumer’s perception of the product. MSIL identifies about high cash availability and approaches it in an innovative way.”

If farmers have the money to buy it goes after marketing farmers from Mahabubabad, orange growers near Nagpur; turmeric growers in Erode (Tamil Nadu) and so on.

The other big concern is of course service and after sales support. Maruti deploys 1,500 mobile support vans. The after sales network is a key communication point at road shows and is often highlighted by a model customer from the village.

Even if communication originally created for urban markets is being used in rural brands need to localise and context to the extent possible, suggests Vivek Nayar, chief marketing officer — automotive division. Mahindra and Mahin-

The communication should be translated into eight languages and runs across 30 regional channels and publications. Even the headlines are localised.

Another key learning, which is a luxury only a vastly diversified conglomerate like Mahindra can afford is to leverage the power of many group companies while heading in the same direction. At the Mahindra Gramin Mahotsav, fairs put together by the company and at haats, everything from the finance business to the agri business (MFA and tractors can be demoed or discussed under a single roof.

The company is tailoring its offering acknowledging the fact that even for the rural consumer, value is not synonymous with the lowest price. As Ravindra Shahane, VP — marketing, farm equipment puts it, “The consumer is highly tried oriented. The improvement in yield weighs heavily on his mind. ‘Kita dekha hai?’ has changed to ‘how well does it do the job?’”

They buy soaps off their mobile phones. And then pose with their newly acquired swag and post the pictures on WhatsApp in the hopes of landing a good bag. No, we are not talking about self and self-obsessed urban millennials but rural consumers who may or may not be millennials.

It’s one of the many signs of change that Amit Sarda, managing director, Soulflower sees among his rural clientele. Not bad at all for a bunch who were not so long ago reached only by highly patronising wall paintings and live events with copious amounts of over-explanation.

Not that wall paintings or events are dead or dying, or (have stopped being patronising). But FMCG marketers today are finding new ways to reach out to a consumer who has changed sig-

ificantly over the years. While the exposure of the rural consumer to media may not be as consistent or frequent as it is with her urban counterpart, pretty much every marketer we spoke to tells us she has the same aspirations and frequently, the same brands on the ‘want’ list. This is particularly evident in Britannia finding takers for even its premium biscuits like Jinn and Bourbon provided they show up at the accessible price point of Rs 5. Sunil Taldekar, director — sales at Montديدة, a rural demand, which was not even in the ‘want’ list. This is particularly evident in Britannia finding takers for even its premium biscuits like Jinn and Bourbon provided they show up at the accessible price point of Rs 5. Sunil Taldekar, director — sales at Mondelez India, who admits to being a late entrant to the rural game, elaborates, “There’s a huge divide between what we’re trying to sell and what the consumer expects. We try to push our low-priced SKUs in rural areas but turns out the consumer is fully aware of our brand, its portfolio; and is willing to spend money on high-end products provided they reach them.”

Brands are finding ways to get across and foresee e-commerce and e-commerce with delivery via the Indian postal service being a way of getting around setting up expensive distribution networks.

Of course, given the non-homogeneity of rural markets, what applies for one part of the country or one set of consumers may not be at all relevant a few thousand kilometres down the road. And yet the business potential for marketers is excited. “According to a Nielsen study, there are approximately 62 lakh villages in India. And out of those, 65,000 deliver the potential of 50% of business from rural markets. That’s 10% giving the value of 50%.”

The learning for us is that even if we focus on 10% of the villages in the country, we’re home as far as success in rural is concerned. So, we’ve chosen 312 districts, called the high potential markets, and it’s imperative for us to concentrate only on those,” admits George Angelo, executive director (sales), Dabur India. According to Sameer Satpathy, CMO at Marico: “Marketing in rural areas of the country helps erode a lot of biases from your experience in urban India. For instance, the concept of a Sunday doesn’t exist in most rural markets. The fields still need to be watered and your cow still needs to be milked. This teaches you a different way of planning for these markets.” It also involves a debunking of other myths such as the persistent one about there being no kirana stores. Maybe not the way most urban people recognise them but they certainly exist. Harit Nagpal, MD and CEO, Tata Sky, recalls, “The deeper you go, you realise that every fourth household has setup a small kirana shop at the back of his house where he keeps two to three pieces of everyday consumption items. Every second week, he cycles to the closest town to buy these items. Basically, if we need something, we find a way to make it available to us. That’s the beauty of this country — its entrepreneurial ability. That’s one reason India will never be good at football. — You give an Indian a corner and he’ll set up a shop there.”

With inputs from Amit Bagna and Shephali Bhatt