



A model education

A personal health care company goes to unusual lengths to improve access to education among the underprivileged

What do you do with a brand that is a household name, apart from pursuing a larger market share?

At personal health care company Marico, the management recognised that Nihar, its prominent brand, needed to stand for something larger than its product attributes – that this brand needed to be faithful not just to consumers in particular but also society in general.

The result was that Marico selected to invest in education for the underprivileged, in line with its faithfulness to its progress-enabling positioning.

This was not as disconnected as it appeared at first glance. Children were the biggest focus of Marico's principal users (women), so engaging in a destiny-transforming activity for underprivileged children was seen as brand-synergic and brand-strengthening.

There are a number of things that I respect about Marico's initiative.

A number of companies would have made arbitrary financial commitments, the 'We will see how things go' kind of loose engagement. Marico institutionalised its commitment through the mandatory allocation of 2 per cent of Nihar Shanti Amla sales proceeds to the cause of children's education. In doing so, the company sent out a signal: related CSR investments would be sustainable; the more the brand grew, the larger would be the CSR engagement; CSR spending would not be something expended out of the profit and loss account in the conventional sense, but attract consumers who would buy this product because of its philanthropic outcome and connect CSR clearly with sales and marketing effectiveness.

A number of companies in Marico's position would have been tempted to go it alone, convinced that their cash, scale and commitment would cover up for their unfamiliarity with the subject. Marico collaborated with CRY instead, plugging into the NGO's deep knowledge through an innovative platform (Chotte Kadam Pragati Ki Aur) starting September 2012.

A number of companies would have provided infrastructure. Marico recognised that this



Children showcase their talent at an education festival organised by Udaan and Marico Ltd.

would only be an objective half-achieved; it focused on the creation of an environment where rural children would not be compelled to drop out for financial and logistical reasons (funding their books, stationary, fees and bicycles wherever needed).

It would have been usual for most to focus on infrastructure and evident facilitators (fees for instance). Marico (through its Nihar Shanti Amla initiative) launched a first-of-its-kind mobile phone-based tutorial called 'Angrezi Mobile Paathshaala', a missed call-based English learning platform. Students were encouraged to place a missed call on a shared number (+91 80556 67788 in this case), activating a return call from Marico, leading to a series of nine English learning modules.

It would have been predictable for this learning module to be unidirectional. Instead, Marico (under the 'Angrezi Mobile Paathshaala' initiative) launched an interactive version to teach value-based English words ('Thank You', 'Welcome', 'Sorry', etc.) with explanations for their usage in diverse situations alongside riddles, music, jingles and short stories. In addition, the medium being available 24x7, the caller is not re-

quire to absorb the entire content at one go, but can revisit the content as per their convenience.

A number of companies would have focused singularly on education. Marico widened its coverage to enhance awareness among the mothers of the children as well, progressively empowering rural women to become key domestic decision makers.

It has been three years since Marico invested in educating underprivileged children; this then may be a fair juncture to draw in the report card.

In the first year following its inception, Nihar Shanti's initiatives made a difference to more than 36,000 children across 15 states and 30 villages. Nihar Naturals Shanti Amla supported over 37 projects across 15 states, touching the lives of 113,294 children; Angrezi Mobile Paathshaala addressed 377,112 total unique callers.

There are a number of instances of success. Take for instance the case of Suhani, 12, who went to school until a few years ago, struggling with her reading and writing. When her parents figured that she wasn't going anywhere, her schooling was discontinued. Suhani was confined to cooking, cleaning, fetching water and taking care of her siblings, which was absolutely in line with the prevailing opinion: people were not comfortable with sending their adolescent daughters to school – there was a feeling that they could 'get out of hand', thus affecting their marriage prospects.

Marico responded through rural community meetings that emphasized the importance of education and how girls could contribute to community development when given equal opportunities. Suhani and other villagers were then guided to Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV), the free-of-cost residential government secondary school for girls. Today, Suhani and her younger sister are in school; she was administered a bridge course to address basic learning levels and admitted into Class 6.

What makes this initiative a model is that this technology-enabled English speaking module can be extended across the country, getting millions of students to develop language speaking capabilities that could one day lead to a job, self-employment or even a more fulfilling existence.