

# Sir, May I Have Some More?

Bland taste, goey texture and a perception of it being for convalescents or Dickensian orphans, has been the bane of oats for long. All that is set to change as a range of marketers rally around the category

Amit Bapna

In early 2012, the ubiquitous Quaker Oats man on the pack underwent a makeover — shedding a few pounds and donning a fitter looking avatar in the brand's logo. The underlying premise — to highlight PepsiCo's healthy product portfolio offering to a fast evolving consumer who was no longer interested in being stuffed with cola and chips. Earlier this year, PepsiCo launched an entire sub-range 'Quaker Fresh Starts' in some markets. It's a range of quick, on-the-go breakfast meal ideas like smoothies, parfait/energy bars and muesli made up of the 'three morning essentials' — fruits, yoghurt & oats. Closer home, the Indian oats story in the branded space that started as early as 2006 when Quaker launched plain oats is coming of age as marketers are cobbling together plans to unlock its full potential.

The inflection really happened with the launch of the savoury (or flavoured) oats around 2010, points out Manoj Menon, group business director, IMRB Kantar Worldpanel. Marico led the savoury oats wave by prototyping and test marketing Saffola Masala oats in 2010 in the South, the hot bed of all test marketing. The launch of the flavours by other players gradually led to an increased relevance and acceptance for the category, that today stands at 9% penetration as per IMRB's house-panel data. To put things in perspective, the far older cornflakes category has seen a penetration of just 12% while noodles is at a humongous 88%. In the case of oats, the width of the penetration has increased on account of both pack size along with flavour variance, adds Menon. Even as the developed world veers towards moderation, balance and holistic wellness, in India too a slew of the biggies — multinationals like PepsiCo, Nestle, Kellogg's, GSK and homegrown players like Marico — are rushing in to sow their oats.

Says Sameer Satpathy, chief marketing officer, Marico, "The goodness of oats is not debatable, how to make it more and more palatable is the big challenge of the category." He is confident that it will morph and change as a category — at present, only the top 30-40 metros have tasted it. Even in terms of the profile, the category, which was earlier considered to be mostly Sec-A youth driven, is seeing increased consumption from middle-class upper age bracket consumers as well.

For Vidur Vyas, senior director, GNG marketing & beverage innovation, PepsiCo India, "the priority has been on communicating two things: the proven benefit of oats and the occasion of consumption." While the former in Quaker's case is being done through nutritional marketing backed by scientific claims on the high fibre content and the heart-health benefits, the occasion of consumption so far has been mostly around breakfast, he adds. When it comes to the local or comparable markets, the cultural attuning and value propositions become key, says Ashish Mishra, managing director, Interbrand India. He cites the example of Quaker, which in India, offers formats and flavours that are dominated by savouries, familiar recipes like *poha*, *upma* and *dalia*; and entry point SKUs.

The biggest challenge for the marketers is how to make a boring category tasty and exciting. While the former needs a robust product pipeline that takes care of the palette, the latter needs engagement opportunities with the consumer to keep her hooked and ensure repeat trials. When Saffola oats was looking to create an engagement platform on the digital medium it launched the 'Fit Foodie' a mix of recipes and culinary suggestions that ensured consumer engagement



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through shareability. Recently the Marico-owned brand extended it to launch the 'Fit Foodie Meter', which essentially scores the recipes on how healthy they are and also provides easy to do tips for healthier recipes.

With convenience playing an important role in food consumption, time-crunched working population particularly from nuclear families is increasing their oat consumption. A significant factor going for oats is that they can be customised to Indian recipes and hence are replacing some of the familiar Indian grains on the breakfast table, says Harpreet Singh Tibb, director of marketing, Kellogg's India. The brand has launched a ready-to-eat offering called Kellogg's Oat-bites and a new variant, Simply *Pongal* oats, to replicate the popular South India breakfast dish (*pongal*).

Modern trade has a big role to play in both increasing the reach and ensuring sampling and brands are looking at innovative tie-ups and co-branding opportunities. GSK for its Horlicks oats brand tried a very unique strategy. Shares Jayant Singh, EVP marketing - GSK Consumer Healthcare, "At the time of launch we didn't go through the traditional food channel, i.e. grocery or modern trade. Instead we piggybacked on the health credentials of oats and entered through the pharmacy channel."

Even as rest of the players in India in the space are getting restricted by the health-taste paradigm, the Swiss-headquartered food and beverage giant Nestle has done a reverse-innovation for this market. It has layered health onto taste by adding oats to its flagship noodles brand Maggi. The challenge for most health-led categories has been to make health enjoyable: while it is a benefit that people want, taste remains a key driver that makes them choose and stay on. Agrees Maarten

Geraets, general manager (foods), Nestlé India, "It was a technical challenge for us as well to build the taste profile on the oats but Nestlé's global research capabilities and R&D strength helped us crack it and develop Maggi Oats Noodles."

Oats is rapidly becoming shorthand to health finding a place across food items — biscuits, traditional snacks like *poha* and *idli* etc. Views Ali Harris Shere, director marketing for Britannia, "The application of oats into categories like biscuits, noodles and breakfast cereals is making the biggest difference to oats consumption in India." Unlike other formats that are not ready to eat, biscuits have made oats more accessible by enabling on-the-go consumption. Britannia's NutriChoice was the first brand to launch diabetic friendly oats biscuits in 2012 and has recently launched NutriChoice Heavens a cookie made up of rolled oats, cranberries and almonds.

The evolution of 'good for you' foods as a category is the larger story, which subsumes growth of oats. This wellness movement is throwing up various need gaps for organisations to fill, says Sandeep Ahuja, MD and group CEO, VLCC Health Care. The brand has introduced a sub-brand VLCC Slimmers, a range of fortified functional foods that contain oats as an integral ingredient.

To become a robust category and leap to the next level, a lot more needs to be done. The onus lies on marketers to think beyond the advertising led approaches that the Indian market is typically confined to. Joono Simon, executive creative director, Ogilvy Bengaluru says pointedly, "Oats has become the aloe vera of the food category. Although it has proven health benefits it is still 'foreign' to our food culture and lesser known by the masses and hence more attractive to the novelty seekers." The challenge for the brands, all of them, is the trapeze walk on the tight rope of health and taste.

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