

How has life and marketing transformed for finance, auto and FMCG companies as they negotiate the rutted roads and narrow bylanes of rural India? And how has the consumer changed? Read on to find out

Beyond The Wall

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When we started work on the Rural Marketing special issue, we were determined to keep the cover clear of the following: Sights of endless farmlands dotted with commercial signs. Young boys sporting Chulbul Pandey goggles, jeans and 'Ed Hardy' tees knocking back some cola, neat. The Missus chatting with her BFF in the next village on her personal cell phone and the hubby checking crop prices later on the same device. The whole family including *dadi* and barefoot kids with 1000-watt smiles huddled around a laptop. Sadhus in deep meditation in the shadow of a giant billboard, and

more such village-y scenes, basically. Obviously, we didn't succumb to the temptation (for the cover at least). Because there's more to rural marketing than wall art, *mukhiyas* and vans equipped with loudspeakers. As complex as the rural Indian market may be, with god knows how many thousands of towns and villages with their own distinct cultures and traditions, it is not beyond comprehension. That is if one bothers to venture beyond the wall and some old misapprehensions. This issue of Brand

Equity attempts to break those very myths to present a very real picture of the changing needs and aspirations of consumers and challenges and opportunities of marketing to rural India today. To start things off, we have a list of some important lessons marketers, both green and seasoned, ought to learn before going rural. These critical lessons come straight from the marketers who've managed, to a commendable extent, to crack rural in their respective categories. So keep this issue handy and use it as a how-to guide to knock down some walls before the next road trip.

Finance

While FMCGs, telecom operators and auto makers have their own laundry list of challenges with rural markets, their jobs are a walk in the park compared to financial institutions. Even before they get down to the task of building brands and preference, pretty much every FI is in the category creation mode. Quite naturally, a sudden shift from relying on the local moneylender for a loan to being offered several flavours and pack sizes of insurance cannot be easy for a consumer. Nor can it happen overnight.

Helping things along though is a commitment from the central government to bring these services to rural markets. Anisha Motwani, director and CMO, Max Life Insurance observes, "In the last few months, over 115 million new zero balance bank accounts have been opened to bring in a larger chunk of the population under the ambit of the financial services."

One of the first lessons banks venturing into this area learn is the need for physical infrastructure. While visits to banks have dropped precipitously in urban areas thanks to ATMs, internet and mobile banking, according to Mohit Ganju SVP - marketing & communication, IndusInd Bank,

"Banks need to create physical (brick & mortar) infrastructure, invest in managing cash and recruit/retain competent employees willing to work in these remote locations, engage with reliable business-correspondents and ensure high levels of service."

The other key lesson is tailoring the offering to make it work harder. Volatile income patterns make financial discipline a difficult task for rural populations. Motwani points out, "Simplicity of product design is another key requirement to attract rural population to the life insurance sector." That and customised products like tractor loans.

Financial service advertising in urban areas makes a fair number of assumptions about the people it's talking to. Which means these ads are likely to yield diminishing returns when presented to a rural consumer. Ajay Kakar, CMO - financial services, Aditya Birla Group, says, "The messaging cues used in their communication are heavily skewed towards urban audiences; their lifestyle, aspirations, behaviour and practices. For a rural audience, these messages are like pouring water over a duck's back."

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Marketing in rural areas of the country helps erode a lot of biases from your experience in urban India

SAMEER SATPATHY
CMO, MARICO



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

HARIT NAGPAL
MD & CEO, TATA SKY