NATUReal's Growth Options: Rural or Urban Markets?

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Description

Brothers' Foods Pvt Ltd is a Gandhinagar, Gujarat, based company, engaged in the processing and marketing of food products such as jams, pickles, sauces and curry pastes since August 2003. The company derives almost 90% of its sales in the state of Gujarat, with the remaining divided between sales in the neighbouring state of Madhya Pradesh as well as exports. Of the total sales in Gujarat, its home market, the company derives over 70% of its revenues from the rural markets across the state.

The company has had its share of ups and downs in the course of over four years and grown on the back of both retail sales as well as contract processing for a variety of customers. The developments over the years have given the owner scope to identify a varied set of objectives as growth options.

Learning Objectives:

The case seeks to address issues in brand management with a specific focus on rural marketing and covers the concepts of brand elements, brand extensions, brand positioning strategies, corporate/umbrella branding versus individual brand names and channel management issues. The case is positioned for use in courses such as introductory marketing management, brand management, rural marketing and integrated marketing communications.

Subjects covered:

Rural brand communications, Brand portfolio management, Brand positioning strategies, Value delivery and rural brand building, Developing a marketing plan

Setting:

Gujarat (Western India), Rural markets, FMCG - processed foods, 2007.

Vijay Chawla sifted through the pile of material before him and pondered when and how he would come to a decision at the earliest. It was almost the end of December, 2007, and he was wondering as to the direction to set for his brands in both, the immediate and long term future. As he studied the reports, point-of-purchase material and other documents before him, he could not help but feel nostalgic.

Company background

Brothers' Foods Pvt Ltd (Brothers') was set up by Vijay Chawla in August 2003 in Gandhinagar district (Gandhinagar city is the capital of Gujarat and is situated to the north-west of Ahmedabad). A timeline of the developments leading to this event is presented in Table-I.

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Table I: Timeline

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1947, pre-partition	At a jamindar's (landlord) farm in Jekhamadabad (now in Pakistan), Tiluram Chawla
	was acknowledged as an expert in pickle preparation.
1947, post partition	Tiluram settles in Udaipur, a city in the southern part of Rajasthan, starts preparing
	and selling pickles door to door on bicycle. Two of his three sons join him in the
	operations.
A few years later	First retail outlet in Udaipur. Third son finishes graduation and joins the business.
1970	Tiluram Chawla passes away.
Early 70s	Dispute in the family. Eldest one branches out on his own and resettles to Jaipur in
	north Rajasthan, with a pact that the other brothers will not market their products in
	Jaipur city. The other two start their own manufacturing unit in Udaipur, Tilu Ram
	and Sons and market their products under the brand name TRAS. With one brother in
	charge of production and the other looking after marketing all over Rajasthan (except
	Jaipur as per the pact), TRAS soon becomes a familiar name.
Mid- to- late 70s	Udaipur, being a famous tourist destination, had many Gujarati families frequenting
	it. Over a period of time, TRAS becomes a well-known name among Gujarati
	tourists, too.
1980	To meet the increasing demand of the Gujaratis, the brothers set up JJ Food
	Industries in Ahmedabad.
Early 80s	Began selling door to door; started their first retail outlet in Kalupur, a locality in old
	city area of Ahmedabad. They noticed that the brand name TRAS (derived from their
	original unit, M/s Tilu Ram and Sons) had a negative connotation in the Gujarati
	language (meaning 'annoyance', 'tyranny', etc!!!). hence they decided to have a
	different brand name for the Ahmedabad unit's products.
1988	Vijay Chawla, son of one of the two brothers, finishes graduation in science at
	Udaipur. Upon his father's wish, he enrolls for a one year, PG Diploma in food
	technology in the UK.
Early 90s	Vijay's cousins branch out of the Ahmedabad operations, one returning to Udaipur
	and the other setting up his own unit at Indore (Madhya Pradesh).
1995	Vijay's father passes away.
August 2003	Brothers' Foods Pvt Ltd set up, with modern hygienic facilities, including food
	laboratory, automated processing line, state-of-the-art packaging, distilled water
	plant, etc.

Brothers' was set up with the objective to produce high quality food products and market them all over the world directly or indirectly. Exhibit-I depicts the state-of-the-art plant and facilities. The company devised the brand name "NATUREAL" and developed subbrands for the various product categories that were introduced, e.g. pickles were marketed under "Natureal Achaar Sing" and jams under "Natureal Fruitina". The product portfolio is given in Exhibit-II (a).

The Initial Period

The initial days were very difficult for Natureal, especially owing to the presence of many players. Occasionally, the company received orders from merchant exporters, largely due to the relationship developed by Vijay during his earlier days in the field. These exporters sold the products under their own brand names. Frontline sales persons were recruited to cater to the retail market's needs. With a bit of hardsell, they did manage to push the initial production into the market, but over 65 per cent of consumer packs were returned by the retailers owing to no off-take. The trade's refrain was that since the brand was new, it would take some time to establish itself. Brothers' tackled this issue by increasing its advertising spends as also participating in two trade exhibitions. But, the results were not encouraging.

The problem of meeting the expenses got compounded owing to the huge inventory of perishable raw material at the factory. As a drastic measure to control costs, the company removed their frontline sales team and decided to explore other modes of solving the problem of dealing with the unsold stock. Two rather unconnected but fortuitous events helped assuage the financial crisis. The first was a large order of about 1,000 metric tonnes of pickles for a leading vernacular newspaper as part of its sales promotion campaign. At around the same time, the long-awaited subsidy from the Ministry of Food Processing (that was applied for at the set-up stage) came through. A few months down the line, a large order for contract manufacturing for a leading local retail chain for their store brand as well as similar orders from other clients kept the company's processes running smoothly.

But, the investment in the Natureal brand name remained a matter of concern as the buildup to the brand's equity had taken a serious knock owing to such tactical decisions as mentioned above. Into his fifth year of operations, Vijay was wondering how to create a bigger buzz with his brands, especially in the markets that mattered to him.

The Rural Market¹

The demographics statistics for India and Gujarat are given in Tables (II-A, B and C). According to a recent report² annual real rural income growth per household will accelerate from 2.8 percent over the past two decades to 3.6 percent over the next two. Today, despite their lower incomes, rural households, due to their majority share of the population, are collectively India's largest consumers - 57 percent of current consumption is in the rural areas. The report notes that, in many ways, India is two economies: rapidly growing urban India, and rural India, which still depends to a large extent on subsistence agriculture. Rural India is home to the bulk of India's population. More than 70 percent Indians live in over 6,00,000 villages. Gujarat is one of the few states in India currently having a relatively better rural infrastructure; e.g., all its villages are now connected by state transport buses. These relatively wealthier states are already attracting greater foreign investment, contributing more than 60 percent to India's GDP and posting better social indicators. These states have already proved to be engines of rural growth.

Consumption of Food and Beverages

India has a strong and long-standing food culture, and the importance of food is reflected in the numbers, as per the McKinsey report quoted earlier. Food, beverages and tobacco forms the single largest consumption category in India today, estimated at approximately Rupees 7.1 trillion and accounting for over 40 percent of total spending. With 70 percent of the population living in rural areas, urban India accounts for only one-third of food consumption today. Also, the Indian food industry is at a nascent stage of development.

Millions of households depend on subsistence farming or local village produce for their food. Almost all agricultural production is unorganized and less than 10 percent of the total food market is branded. Also, with an estimated 60 lakhs traditional retail outlets, organized food retailing constitutes less than 1 percent of the food-distribution market.

A related development in rural retailing that could have significance for marketers of many product categories is the state government's role in revitalizing its public distribution system (see Table-III).

Multinational and Indian companies alike are now tapping into the rural markets with a vigor never seen before. Till recently, most fast moving consumer goods (FMCG) companies

used to treat rural markets as adjuncts to their urban strongholds and rural consumers as a homogenous mass without segmenting them into target markets and positioning brands appropriately³. India's rural market has been growing steadily over the years and is now bigger than the urban market for FMCG items (53 percent share of the total market). According to a study by the Indian government's think-tank, National Council for Applied Economic Research (NCAER), there are as many 'middle-income and above' households in the rural areas as there are in the urban ones. Moreover, there are twice as many 'lower middle income' households in the rural areas as in the urban areas. At the highest income level, there are 2.3 million urban households as against 1.6 million households in the rural areas. As per the NCAER projections, the number of middle and high-income households in rural India is expected to have grown from 80 million to 110 million by the year-end 2007. In urban India, the middle and high-income market is expected to grow from 46 million to 59 million. Thus, the absolute size of rural India is expected to be double that of urban India. But despite the high rural share in these categories, the rural penetration levels are low, thus offering tremendous potential for growth.

The most important driver of food, beverage and tobacco consumption growth in rural India will be the fall in poverty levels. The middle and high-income households in rural areas mentioned above will dominate rural food consumption, as per the McKinsey report. Over the next two decades, more than 55 million rural households are expected to move up from the current level of deprivation and 35 million rural households are expected to move to middle income levels. Malnourished in the past, these consumers' greatest latent demand will be for more and better quality food, and this will create greater demand for basic foods in the country. Since households emerging from poverty will still spend most of their increasing disposable income on food, they will still be exceedingly price-conscious. However, they will, at the same time, be willing to try new products within their price reach. These consumers will also be diversifying, for the first time, from basic food-grain consumption to fruits, vegetables, dairy and poultry products as well as various beverages.

Defining the 'Rural' market

The definition of 'rural' as per the Government of India (see footnote 1) has not been found to be useful from a marketing strategy standpoint by industries. In fact, even government bodies have different definitions; e.g. Reserve Bank of India classifies locations with population up to 10,000 as rural and between the range 10,001 - 100,000 as semi-urban. National Bank for Agricultural and Rural Development identifies all locations irrespective of villages or towns, up to a population of 10,000 as rural. Planning Commission of India considers all towns with population up to 15,000 as rural. Companies have developed their own criteria of what constitutes rural markets. Some of the prevalent company practices in identifying 'rural markets' are:

- a. Durable goods companies such as LG Electronics tend to focus on larger settlements and classify towns with population of up to 50,000 as 'rural'.
- b. Leaving aside Hindustan Unilever and ITC, most companies in the fast moving consumer goods sector would define rural as any place with a population below 20,000.⁵
- c. Sahara India considers locations having shops/commercial establishments up to 1,000 as rural.

Brothers' too had developed an understanding of what constituted 'rural markets' for the company. The current level of penetration of Brothers' products in the Gujarat market has led it to identify Ahmedabad, Vadodara and Surat as the three urban markets covered. The

company's products also reach smaller towns and the villages in their periphery. Of the total retail sales of Brothers', 90% are in Gujarat, with the rest coming from the neighbouring state of Madhya Pradesh and a little bit from exports (still in a very nascent stage). Of the total sales in Gujarat, over 70% comes from its rural markets.

Some Marketing Mix Elements of Natureal

Product

Exhibits II (a) and II (b) outline the product categories and line extensions of Brothers' offerings. Vijay had introduced processed foods in six distinct categories: jams, pickles, curry pastes, sauces, syrup concentrates and squash concentrates. All products were identified by a common umbrella: "NATUREal" written with an emphasis on the word 'real' at the end (see Exhibit-II for the umbrella brand's logo and brand characters of the sub-brands). Exhibits III (a) - (d) depict the labels of the variants of each sub-brand. The colour schemes were chosen to match with the variant's characteristics.

Place

Brothers' had rationalized its sales and marketing expenses as part of its overall cost-cutting measures when it faced financial difficulties. The company leased three vans for delivering its loads to distributors and retailers. Apart from this, it would hire additional vans as and when required. In Gujarat, it covered almost the entire north Gujarat and major parts of central and south districts and serviced about 5,000 retail outlets.

The company divided the Gujarat market into urban and 'rural'. It served Ahmedabad, Vadodara and Surat (the three major cities) under the former category. There were eight distributors for Ahmedabad, three for Vadodara and five in Surat. Each distributor served about 200 retail outlets on an average. Recently, the company had appointed stockists for its Ahmedabad and Surat markets. Apart from serving the distributors, each stockist also covered adjoining semi-urban areas. E.g., the stockist at Surat covered Bharuch, Ankleshwar, Bilimora, Jambusar, Dahod, Rajpipla and Godhra towns. Apart from the above, the company had one distributor each in thirteen towns of north and central Gujarat including Anand, Nadiad, Kheda, Mehsana, Himmatnagar, Idar, Palanpur, Vijapur, Mansa, Kalol, Kadi, Patan and Sidhpur. The semi-urban areas comprised of what Brothers' terms its 'rural markets'.

Distribution: Modus Operandi

Brothers' followed an innovative practice in effecting its deliveries. It has leased three vans as of now to this effect. Its salesperson accompanies the truck to the distributor whence the distributor's salesperson joins the trip. Both of them then visit the retail outlets for servicing their needs. After effecting deliveries directly at the retail outlets, the van then offloads the remaining load at the distributor's office. Over the years, Vijay had noted that this practice led to the following:

- Retailers seemed more confident about dealing with Natureal brands since they felt that the company van comes directly to serve them; they become more positively inclined towards the brands than if only the distributor had serviced them.
- Control over delivery, including timeliness.
- Payment was effected better since the company salesperson directly handled the invoice issues.
- Reverse distribution issues such as product replacements were handled better and to the satisfaction of the retailers.
- Sales as well as promotion were effectively handled since the company salesperson could promote more products and effect cash sales of items that did not feature in the

original orders. Promoting new product introductions and line extensions was easy since the company salesperson was better equipped to show samples and also generate initial orders at the same time.

- Large companies did not follow this practice for small towns.
- Flexibility and speed in resolving potential channel conflict issues like replacements (unlike the more cumbersome method that entailed issuance of credit notes and adjustments in future orders as followed by the bigger companies this was reported by retailers in small towns as a cause for worry since they were not literate enough to understand the concept of credit notes).
- The direct contact with retailers helped the company in its 'push' strategy.

Promotion

The company has participated in five trade shows in Ahmedabad, Surat and Patan. The labels on the packages too served to identify and distinguish the products not just from competition but also amongst its variants. Also, the continuing patronage of the leading regional daily for its promotional programme has enabled Brothers' brands to penetrate into the urban and semi-urban households - the daily's second highest readership in the state helps in the brand's penetration.

A couple of years ago, the local retail chain in Ahmedabad to whom Brothers' acted as a supplier for their store brand, was acquired by a leading national retail chain. Vijay got an opportunity to enhance his visibility as well as 'equity' by associating with this prestigious name. This time, however, the entry was not in the form of supplier to a private label, but his brands got the shelf space that mattered. Additionally, Vijay got a chance to promote his products, especially pickle brands, in-store with product sampling.

A leading FMCG company of Ahmedabad had shown its faith in Brothers' and engaged its services in processing certain products. This was turning out to be a lucrative proposition for Brothers'. This company had also got orders from a leading pharmaceutical (pharma) company for packaged foods as part of the latter's sales promotion campaign to its doctors. Concurrently, Brothers' also got orders from a couple of small pharma companies in Ahmedabad for similar packs meant for doctors in the semi-urban and rural areas that were being served by these pharma companies. These specialty item orders were in the range of 20,000 units to 50,000 units at a time. The logic behind the small and medium pharmacompanies' orders was that they wanted to provide some utility 'gift' items to doctors rather than the desk-top calendars, paper-weights, and sundry stationery items that were not well-appreciated by doctors in the semi-urban and rural areas.

The leased vans also provide the company with a chance to enhance its 'on-road' visibility. One of the vans has panels on its sides advertising Brothers' products (see Exhibit-IV). Every year, the company also invites all its distributors from small towns to its factory. The tour of the facilities along with explanation of recent developments ends with a small token of appreciation to the distributors (often comprising of soft toys for their children, etc).

Challenges Ahead

As he studied the company's progress over the past four years, Vijay wondered about the direction he should chart. A few alternatives immediately came up for his consideration:

Leveraging on his experiences as a contract processor for the leading vernacular daily, a leading FMCG brand based out of Ahmedabad, a leading and some smaller pharmaceutical companies as well as his experiences with supplying to a private label brand meant he could take the Natureal brand and Brothers' into the consideration set of leading

MNC retail brands as they came into India in the near future or position himself as a supplier of choice to leading retail brands in the US, Western Europe and the Middle-East. The state-of-the-art processing unit (see Exhibit-I) as well as his success in the made-to-order business could hold keys to attaining competitive advantage if he made such a pitch.

- Brothers' could leverage upon its existing brand elements especially the by-line for Natureal, 'pamper the child in you' and the brand characters already developed to undertake a market development strategy in the major urban centres in other states of India. Branding success in the urban market would give Vijay a much needed brand 'boost' which could then be taken into a 'down-market stretch' later on. He could retract from the semi-urban and lesser towns of Gujarat for now and establish his presence in other states.
- Looking to the already developing 'equity' with distributors, retailers and consumers in the semi-urban and rural pockets in the whole of north Gujarat and major parts of central and south Gujarat, Vijay felt he could attain better coverage of the remaining pockets in these parts and leverage upon this performance to enter the geographically larger Kachchh and Saurashtra regions of Gujarat. Even at an optimistic estimate, Vijay could not count over 5,000 retail outlets where he was present. This meant that the number of retailers left unserved was too huge and too alluring to be ignored. Also, the prospects of serving a market relatively less crowded, unlike the urban markets which were seeing increased competition from major FMCG players, was a very important factor for his company's roadmap for the future. An unrelated development also gave Vijay the confidence to penetrate the rural market further. As mentioned earlier, small pharmaceutical companies in Ahmedabad had started the practice of giving processed food special packs as specialty items for doctors in the semi-urban and rural areas. If the phenomenon could be taken up by more numbers of small and medium pharmaceutical companies. Natureal could leverage on the positive word-of-mouth generated and consolidate its presence in the smaller markets. Should Natureal become a rural marketer by choice? If so, how should the 'rural markets' be defined for Brothers'?

Vijay knew he had to be careful in setting his objectives for his expansion. As a small and growing company, he could dabble in 'this and that' from time to time more in a bid to ensure continuing streams of little revenues for his company. The time was now ripe for him to take a firm stance as regards the direction he wanted to take and commit his resources accordingly. He wondered what was more important to his future growth:

- Brothers' as a corporate 'brand' standing for quality and reliability as far as delivery of made-to-order packs were concerned,
- Natureal as a consumer brand, or
- The sub-brands in his 'basket' of offerings that could convey the 'meaning' of the specific product line they represented without impinging on the other lines.

Table II (A): All-India Population Distribution (by Age)

	0 - 19 Age Group	20 - 59 Age Group	60 + Age Group
TOTAL			
• Persons	463,826,702	485,422,833	76,622,321
• Males	243,427,313	249,460,570	37,768,327
• Females	220,399,389	235,962,263	38,853,994
RURAL	1 5		
• Persons	346,008,800	337,140,307	57,444,714
• Males	181,303,059	170,904,615	28,359,605
• Females	164,705,741	166,235,692	29,085,109
URBAN			
• Persons	117,817,902	148,282,526	19,177,607
• Males	62,124,254	78,555,955	9,408,722
• Females	55,693,648	69,726,571	9,768,885

Source: Census 2001, quoted in The Marketing Whitebook 2006, Businessworld, page 23

Table II (B): Demographic Statistics for Gujarat

		Population		Literacy			No. of	0-6 years
		(%)		Levels (%)			households	old
		Male	Female	Total	Male	Female		
Total	50,596,992	52	48	29,050,019	60	40	9,643,989	6,865,390
Rural	31,697,615	51	49	15,836,369	62	38	5,885,961	4,640,932
Urban	18,899,377	53	47	13,213,650	57	43	3,758,028	2,224,458

Source: Census 2001, quoted in The Marketing Whitebook 2006, Businessworld, page 26

Table II (C): Comparison of Rural Household Assets and Commercial Establishments

	No. of House-hold; (Population)	HH with Electricity (%)	Television (%)	Telephone (%)	Scooter, Motorcycle, Moped (%)	Car, Jeep, Van (%)	No. of Shops
INDIA	138,271,559 (741,660,293)	44	19	3.8	6.7	1.3	5,556,717
GUJARAT	5,885,961 (31,697,615)	72	22	5.5	11.8	1.8	238,870

Source: MART Study, quoted in The Marketing Whitebook 2006, Businessworld, pages 89, 90

Table III: Rural Malls in Gujarat (press report)

Model fair price shops, grandly described by the government as micro rural malls, are springing up all over Gujarat where village people can shop for all their needs 24x7.

Already 512 such 'malls' have sprouted and another 508 are on the anvil. The state government plans to have 1,000 such malls every year, official sources told the media.

The 'malls' are in effect model fair price shops under a programme launched to de-regulate the scope of services of fair price shops by allowing them to deal with all kinds of goods and services. The revamping of the public distribution system undertaken by the state's department of civil supply is the first of its kind initiative in India, the sources said. There are about 15,000 fair price shops all over Gujarat.

Encouraged by the success of programme, the state has suggested to the central government that the programme be included in the list of plan schemes. At the rural malls, people can buy not just grains, fortified flour and edible oils and other essential commodities but also get gas cylinders, cosmetic items, recharge vouchers, fertilizers, seeds and packaged goods. The sources said the malls were proving to be viable commercial centres, meeting diverse needs of villagers.

The concept seeks to make the model fair price shops meet the retail needs on the lines of the modern market, while controlling at the same time the practice of leakages and diversion of essential goods meant for vulnerable sections of the society who are eligible holders of the ration cards. The owners of the shops used to earn not more than Rs 1,500-2,000 as commission from sales initially. They can now hope for earnings of Rs 5,000 a month.

Following the initiative, companies like ITC, HLL, major oil companies, Videocon and telephone service providers like Tata, BSNL and Hutch are supplying their wares. Other products include Life Insurance Corp (LIC) policies and ice cream parlours. Both state-run and private banks are trying to position themselves in the rural areas by making the malls a sale link for their financial products.

The proliferation of the malls has cut down the time and money people from rural and semi-urban areas used to spend to go to urban centres. The use of computers will be introduced gradually to take care of the Value Added Tax calculations.

Source: 'Gujarat Now Has Its Rural Malls', The Economic Times, January 4, 2007.

Exhibit I: Brothers' Food Pvt Ltd - Processing unit





Exhibit II (a): Natureal's Brand Portfolio

Brand name	Product category and line extensions		
Achaar Sing	Pickles - Punjabi mixed, mixed, sweet mango, mango, chilli, 'masala' green chilli, 'red stuffed' chilli, lemon chilli, sweet lemon, garlic, carrot, 'masala kair', fermented 'kair' (a berry), fermented chilli, 'chana methi' (chickpeas and fenugreek), mango 'chhunda' (minced pickle), mango 'methi'		
Froot Buddy	Squash concentrates		
Fruitina	Fruit jams - Mixed fruit, pineapple		
KooKing	Curry pastes - Ginger, garlic, ginger-garlic		
Sarbati	Flavored syrup concentrates - Rose		
Soss ka Boss	Sauces - Tomato, red chilli, green chilli, soya		
	from the above product lines and extensions, the company also r products to special orders.		

Exhibit II (b): Natureal - Brand logos and characters



Exhibit III: Label colour schemes for product variants (a) 'Achar Sing' Pickles















Exhibit III (con't): Label colour schemes for product variants (b) 'Sarbati' Syrups





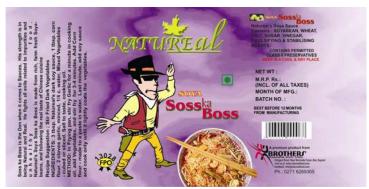






Exhibit III (con't): Label colour schemes for product variants (c) 'Soss Ka Boss' Sauces





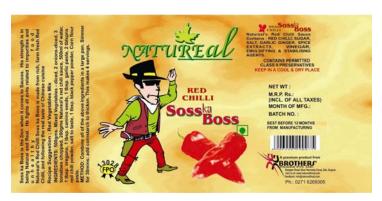




Exhibit III (con't): Label colour schemes for product variants (d) 'Fruitina' Jams









Exhibit IV: Panels on the company's leased delivery van







