

Wooing Rural Customers!

Dr Tapan K Panda

(The author looks at the potential of the rural markets of India and innovative strategies followed by the advertisers to woo rural audience for making a brand choice)

Since long Indian marketers are trying to consolidate their brands in the rural markets of India. The estimate speaks of the potential volume of business that can be generated in Indian Rural markets. The estimate is about three times that of the European Market. Yet there has not been substantial progress in this area. The reasons are well known. The rural market is typically a seasonal market. The consumption level goes high in post monsoon and dries up during non-crop period.

The unit disposable consumption level is very low and the assortment has to be made in a different size compared to the urban market to make it suitable for the rural customer's pocket. Multiplicity of assortment adds up to the cost level of the product and works against adding experience effect to the production. Further more the distributed settlement and high transportation cost makes it potentially less feasible for many companies to launch products for rural consumption. Yet few success stories in Indian marketing history makes it a point to enter in to the rural market. The pressure from the multinationals in the urban markets is also forcing the domestic marketers to search for alternatives.

The saturation of urban markets, the demanding urban customers and intermediaries and frequent promotion schemes to break the brand loyalty level are factors forcing for an entry in to the rural market. But rural market has its own inherent problems! One of them being the low level of education that creates problem in brand identification. Since they can not read the brand names and price tags it makes it easier for the clones to launch brands similar in label and design and spoil the brand image of the so called successful urban brands.

Unscrupulous retailers are taking the benefit and damaging the perception of the brands before they actually enter in to the rural market. So marketers and advertisers are looking for alternate medium for promoting brands through advertising. The success of a business in India will be decided in future by its success in the heart of India i.e. the rural market. The rural advertising in India needs some innovative and alternative media to woo the customers. The conventional wisdom of urban glossy advertising and fantasy mix through television is not going to work in the rural markets.

The Joint Publicity Committee of the nationalized banks started advertising through mobile van publicity in early 90s in the rural markets of India. It is a potential tool for reaching customers but how do we do that? The best would be to make an announcement in the village about a show of some religious and holy films in the local language and in between we can carry the message to the audience. Rural advertising strategy is not only important for those who are planning for a brand promotion in the rural market but also for the existing players in the businesses like tractors, pesticides, fertilizers. Conventional media like television and radio covers some of the areas but still 265 million are beyond the catch of advertisers through the available vehicles! Even

though there is a reach to the villages but how many of them have the rural electricity to run the shows! The rural audience may have the purchase parity to be a potential customer but his idea of consumption and behavior as a consumer is completely different. So the vehicle as well as the message has to be in the liking of the rural customer.

Corporations and advertising agencies have started working out in this area. The puppet shows in Punjab, Folk media like *Ragini* in *Haryana* for communicating qualities of *Virat* cement, *Pala* and *Daskathia* in *Orissa* for promoting safe electricity consumption and tooth pastes of Colgate Palmolive, *Baul* songs in West Bengal for advertising insecticides are some of the examples. Britannia has entered in to the rural market by participating in rural *melas* and displaying its down market brand Britannia Tiger Biscuits. These rural *melas* and weekly *haats* have become more popular medium of rural advertising by the media planners.

Through this arrangement they can break the saddle of scant geographical distribution of customers in rural markets as people of number of villages assemble together to participate in the fair. It is a good ground for brand awareness building, trial sales and sampling. It provides a wider audience at a fairly low cost. Companies like *HLL*, *Titan* and *Colgate Palmolive* use festivals like *Rathyatra*, *Kumbhmela*, and *Onam* for brand promotion. These companies are following a typical media schedule and are always in a march from one place to the other with our festival calendar and a collapsible arrangement of the exhibition setup. Companies can also use popular forms of entertainment like puppetry, *nautanki*, *ragini*, *bhangra*, *qaualli* and traditional dance shows to increase the brand experience. The companies can develop a story line relating to the brand and show the characters using the brands for their advantage and even the dresses of the characters can be that of the brand's packaging.

The *Lowe Lintas* 's database covering 5.96 lakh villages over 459 districts suggest the best places to undertake a brand promotion. The recent example of adopting a railway station by Titan during *Kumbha mela* helped them to generate a high brand recall as for each arrival of the train the announcement was made "Welcome to Sonata-Naini".

The extensive network of postal and medical workers throughout the country can be used as an alternative vehicle for brand promotion in the rural areas. The days are not far when the postbox, post office walls and the postman's dress will carry the logo and brand names of companies, the walls of the rural primary health centers, the schools will be covered by suitable brand advertising catering to the taste of the rural target market. Once this innovation of reaching through alternate cost effective media starts then the rural consumption will go high making it potentially more attractive than the urban market.

(The author is a faculty Member at Indian Institute of Management, Lucknow and can be reached at tapan@iiml.ac.in)