
Communication Strategy for Rural Markets: A Study on India

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INTRODUCTION

The census of India defines rural as any habitation with a population density of less than 400 per sq.km., where at least 75 per cent of male working population is engaged in agriculture and where there exists no municipality or board. Of the nearly 6.4 lakh villages in India, only 20,000 villages have populations more than 5,000. Leaving aside Hindustan Lever and ITC, most companies in the FMCG sector would define rural as any place with a population up to 20,000. Similarly, durable and agri-input companies would consider any town with a population below 50,000 as rural.

Companies face many challenges in tackling the rural markets, some of the more critical being: understanding rural consumers, reaching products and services to remote rural locations and communicating with vastly heterogeneous rural audiences. Sadly, not many companies have invested sufficient effort and money in research and nor have they spent enough time in the field to understand rural consumers, their values, aspirations, needs and usages habits. Marketing is all about 'getting to know your customer', but having largely ignored this cardinal principle, most corporate in rural markets find that success has eluded them.

COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

Advertising goes hand in hand with economic growth. With economic liberalization and increasing rural prosperity, marketers are keen to inform villagers about the benefits of buying and consuming their products and services. Prior to the introduction of economic liberalization in 1990s, there was little incentive for marketers to advertise their products and services, as rural markets were predominantly a seller's market.

The influence of the electronic media, in particular television, video and the Hindi film industry, is contributing to the growth of rural aspirations, which are being manifested in rural India in the form of increasing consumerism.

The rural environment is different from the urban and therefore communication to potential customers in a proper and effective manner is a major challenge for corporate marketers. The majority of advertisements designed by corporate marketers, are largely urban oriented and extend themselves to rural areas without any consideration to the values and sensitivities of the rural audience, which are often in striking contrast to those of their urban counterparts. This has led to a negative perception in the minds of villagers, about urban media planners and advertisers.

Rural communication is not a 'peripheral activity'. It does not, for instance, involve taking an audio-visual van to a village and assuming that this step is enough to reach out to customers. It requires an entirely different mindset, which demands getting rid of many mental barriers. Companies have to realize that rural is a long-haul market, as gains in the short term are neither immediate nor large.

CHALLENGES IN RURAL COMMUNICATION

There are many challenges to communication in rural. Low literacy level; poor media reach and exposure and vast, heterogeneous and diversely spread rural audiences characterized by variations in language, culture and lifestyle-all these factors pose multiple challenges to marketers looking to take their messages to the largely media-dark or media-grey areas, of rural markets.

Heterogeneity and spread

The communication pattern in any society is a part of its culture. No communication medium can exist in a cultural vacuum. Communicating the message to rural consumers has posed enormous challenges to the rural marketer, because of the large numbers of consumers scatters across the country. The problem is further compounded by the heterogeneous nature of consumers there are 16 scheduled languages and 114 local vernaculars. For example, the dialect used in the Vidharbha region, in konkan region, in costal Maharashtra.

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Limited Media Reach

The limited reach of the mass media imposes limitations on universal communication to rural consumers. These factors lead to poor message comprehension and negligible impact, which fail to translate into consumer awareness and hence fail in generating consumer pull.

Understanding the Rural Audience

It is not sufficient to understand rural communication challenges as stated above: rather, what is equally crucial is the need to understand the behavioral and psychographic characteristics of the rural audience, in order to develop an effective rural communication strategy.

CREATING ADVERTISEMENTS FOR RURAL AUDIENCES

Communication experts need to keep the following factors in mind when creating advertisements for rural audiences.

* Understanding the mindset of potential customers, including their hopes, fears, aspirations and apprehension conducting a qualitative study among the target audience would help in better understanding of the consumer mindset.

* Pick up 'gems' in the form of idioms, expressions, words, etc. in relation to the product category for later use in the creative.

* Tricky, clever, gimmicky, or even suggestive advertising does not work with rural audiences. 'Flicks' using very expensive computer graphics without any human presence go over the heads of rural audiences.

* Combining education with 'entertainment is a good route to take when targeting rural audiences. Using locally popular film stars or even featuring religious events (melas) popular in the region, helps strike a chord with rural audiences. According to a study, it is Govinda and Sharukh Khan who is most popular among rural folk in north India.

* 'Quickies' (short television commercials) do not register well with rural audiences. Advertising agencies need to provide for ample time and space to communicate a message properly and effectively to the intended audience. This is seen for instance, in the popularity of the two-minute theatre commercials screened in rural cinemas.

RURAL MEDIA

* Rural media can be classified broadly into conventional mass, non-conventional media and personalized media. The various media vehicles are as follows:

CONVENTIONAL MASS MEDIA	NON-CONVENTIONAL MEDIA	PERSONALIZED MEDIA
Television	Haat and mela	Direct mailer
Radio	Folk media (puppet show, magic show)	Point of sale(demonstration, leaflet)
Press	Video van	Word of mouth
Cinema	Mandi	Interpersonal communication
Outdoor: wall painting, hoarding		Animator

INOVATIVE MEDIA**OUTDOOR MEDIA: WALL PAINTING**

* This medium is the most widespread form of advertising and is the favorite of the Indian rural masses, as they can view it at their leisure. Wall paintings are important because they constantly remind rural people about name and logos in addition to highlighting the key brand promise. They also reflect the vibrant economic and social life of the area.

Characteristics of wall paintings

* They are economical as compared to other traditional media forms, as the manpower and infrastructure requirements are low.

* They can easily be customized in accordance with regional language variations without this impacting their artistic content.

* Audience recall rates are high.

Limitations

- * The lack of availability of wall space at prominent locations is an issue.
- * The quality of the wall space available is not always satisfactory. The base of rural wall structures is generally not smooth and this impacts the final output.
- * No exclusive wall rights are given to the company. It may happen that a company gets a wall painted and after sometimes when the company executive passes through, he finds that the painting has been replaced by the advertisement of some other company.
- * The quality of the painters available is also low. Companies prefer hiring painters locally as they are familiar with the area and the cost of hiring them is lower when compared to the cost of hiring painters from outside.

FOLK MEDIA

- * Folk media consist of folk songs, folk dances and other theatrical forms, including puppetry, street theatre and magic shows, which are an intrinsic part of the culture and heritage of the land.
- * They are capable of communicating message about contemporary issues, topics and concerns as per the needs and demands of a changing society.
- * They are a face-to-face and personal form of communication.
- * The essential characteristics of folk media are that are interactive, repetitive and narrative

Kinds of Folk Media

- * Folk theatre
- * Magic show
- * Puppet shows
- * Interactive games
- * Folk Theatre

Folk theatre, interspersed with folk song and dance, is a simple and entertaining form of communication. It can also be informative and educational. In the past, folk theatre has been used to arouse public opinion against the British Raj, to draw attention to atrocities against the girl child and raise public consciousness about other socially relevant issues.

*** Folk songs**

Folk songs are basically simple and direct compositions that are usually transmitted orally from one generation to the next and not through the written word. The structure of the folk song is characterized by simplicity and uniformity in rhythm. The songs consist of many stanzas sung in more or less the same tune. Each region and state has its own particular traditions of folk songs and ballads.

*** Folk Dances**

Folk dances are basically simple and rhythmic and mostly religious in nature. Communication takes place through dramatic gestures and the accompanying music. Folk dances are visually very arresting, attracting audiences with their elaborate costumes and stage settings.

*** Magic shows**

Magic shows are another very entertaining form of folk entertainment and draw large crowds, particularly because of the curiosity factor and the use of hypnotic effects.

*** Puppet Shows**

The kathputli puppet performance is the most common form of this folk tradition. The origin of puppet theatre is closely linked to the performance of religious ceremonies. The connection between rituals and the use of puppets is found in almost all the states in India.

Traditional puppeteers were mostly itinerant performers who depended on royal patronage for their survival. Even today tales of chivalrous kings like Prithviraj C Chauhan and Amar Singh Rathor are narrated through puppet performances in the villages and towns of Rajasthan.

The different forms of traditional puppetry are glove, rod, string-rod and shadow puppets. The differences exist not only in name but also in form, structure, manipulation techniques and geographical origin spread.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, it is clear that in any form of rural communication, while we may have a national strategy, we have to think and act locally. The need for focused communication aimed at the rural market, should not be underestimated. This calls for innovation and substantive changes in marketing strategies and

approaches. The innovation should be carried out within the framework of what can best be characterized as the 4-R principle:

* Relevance

* Reliability

* Reach

* Reincarnate innovation

If the Indian advertising industry is to reach out to rural India in an effective and efficient manner, it has to be grounded firmly in rural perceptions, value and traditions. It has to immerse itself in local colours, customs and modes of communication in order to make itself relevant to the needs and desires of rural society. It has to gain the trust of the masses by undercutting its own excessive dependency on western styles of advertising, on the one hand and on its use of deceptive and manipulative claims, on the other. It has to reach out to rural consumers and relate to them at an appropriate level, so that it can bring about the desired behavioral changes. Finally, it has to find ways to reincarnate innovation. The four components are not mutually exclusive; they share an interdependent relationship.

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