

BE
On The Road

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Rural contact in India meant flip charts and skits. Now, HUL is using LCD TVs and a DVD player in a *palkhi* to talk to the masses

Doli-ing out the goodies

Ravi Balakrishnan

THE landscape on the outskirts of Lucknow is dotted with smoking brick kilns and houses in different stages of construction or demolition — it's hard to tell the difference. With temperatures close to a searing 45°C, it often feels like the entire area is trapped inside a gigantic brick kiln. It's a minor inconvenience though in the grand scheme of things; reaching what

Sudanshu Vats, vice president — personal wash and home care, Hindustan Unilever calls "the most happening part of India." Vats is referring not just to rural Uttar Pradesh but to rural India in general; a key focus area for HUL in 2010. The company has ambitious plans to reach 12 to 15 million consumers across UP, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh through the course of this year. Hardaurpur, an eventual destination, is just one of the villages with a 1,000 plus population covered by HUL's *Khushiyon Ki Doli*, its latest

brand building initiative in rural markets.

With 24 hour electricity, Hardaurpur is better off than large parts of rural UP and even some urban centres like Kanpur which is subject to a merciless regimen of load shedding. The villagers smile smugly and say they owe an uninterrupted power supply to their proximity to the farmhouses of the rich and influential in Lucknow. Young men crank their mobile phones to maximum volume on speaker mode. Filling a 1 GB memory stick with Hindi film songs costs a mere Rs 40, and you can get twice that capacity for Rs 70. The village is mercifully cooler than most of the surrounding areas; one of the reasons why women and children venture out to participate in *Khushiyon Ki Doli*.

HUL is no stranger to the hinterlands. The distribution model built around its Project Shakti is still going strong. But *Khushiyon Ki Doli*, an awareness and engagement module, is notable for its use of technology. Traditionally, rural marketing relies on promotional tools that were cutting edge at the turn of the last century — flipcharts and skits conducted by promoters. It has been hard to build scale around expensive options like vans and video on wheels. HUL now believes it has arrived at the right model. "This is a 2010 rural contact programme," says Vats. "We are going into the dusty roads of India and interacting with the rural consumer but we are using technology of the millennium." Adds Sanjay Gupta, country head, Ogilvy Outreach, HUL's rural marketing agency, "It's about finding out whether we can create media in a media dark area and beyond that, engagement."

Khushiyon Ki Doli has all the trappings of a rural marketing programme. A set of four *palkhis* or *dolis* move to different localities in the village drawing an audience of around 25 housewives and children. It ties into the narrative of the *doli* and its heroine a smart, educated housewife, *Khushi didi*, who has moved into the village. Concealed within each *doli* is a LCD TV, a DVD player and a small generator. With a promoter to motivate the audience, *Khushi didi's* story is told via an animated film. Through the awareness module, consumers are shown ads for a range of HUL's products. Many of the rural audience in media dark areas are seeing these commercials for the very first time, including creative work that's clearly targeted at an urban demographic. Vats believes a village housewife will have no trouble identifying with this show reel: "The rural consumer relates to the urban consumer aspirationally, and the urban consumer looks up to the metro consumer. The brands we take into villages are largely urban. What you should take watch out for is something that's been created for Malabar Hill. Then you have a problem."

Up next is the engagement module; product demonstrations which tend to be highly interactive and for which the films are created from ground up. The housewives have by now settled into something of a comfort zone and pay close attention as *Khushi didi* tells them about *Rakhi didi* (who uses ash or *raakh* to wash utensils) and *Vimla didi* (who, of course, uses Vim) followed by a live product demo on an oil saturated plate.

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The next segment is about Surf Excel, featuring an animated version of the recent 'scarecrow' TV commercial with a more elaborate back story. It ends with a product demonstration that pits the detergent against stubborn stains.

Unlike metro activations where brand teams often struggle to get any sort of a reaction from a jaded audience, the promoter has his hands full, controlling over-enthusiastic children and housewives who hover between being sceptical and curious. The product demo over the commercials are reprised, with explanations on how each of these — everything from Close Up toothpaste to Huggies diapers — have a role in their lives.

Finally there are a set of games with sachets as prizes, apart from special offers on bundled products with the price never exceeding a comfortable Rs 10. Sales done, and a bunch of Salman Khan masks distributed among children, the *doli* moves on to another part of the village. Typically four of these *dolis* are deployed in the larger villages covering four or five locations each, a total of 18 to 20 a day. Away from the bustle, the final module takes place: engagement with local retailers with fresh point of purchase merchandise and new stock being sold.

Khushiyon Ki Doli emerged from HUL's attempts to leverage its scale and diverse portfolio



PHOTO: SANJAY GUPTA

RURAL MANTRA

The rural markets are poised to become a segment that no one can afford to ignore — especially since they showed rare resilience through 2009 when demand went south across urban centres. Here are some essential tips from the experts that any marketer wanting to venture into rural India needs to keep in mind:

Succeeding in rural markets requires a long term commitment: According to Pradeep Kashyap, founder, MART, "rural is not about the next quarter. Clients want to invest today and see results tomorrow. But you will get results only if you invest for the next decade."

The size of the market does not guarantee numbers: Marketers are sometimes unwilling to invest in innovations, processes, channels and delivery systems, says Kashyap. They need a strong a strong plan at all levels from relevance of product to relevance of communication to the right price and channel. Adds Samir Gupte, country head, Ogilvy Outreach, "The approach should change from 'modifying what I have' to 'creating what they don't have.'"

Connect with the consumer: Kashyap believes nothing substitutes for a firsthand linkage with the consumer. While relieved that companies are talking less about pilots and more about scale, he cautions against over-reliance on NGOs and microfinance groups: "they are not into business and marketing. One cannot expect them to have a mindset for it."

lio in rural marketing. Vats admits it was a struggle to determine the sufficient number of brands while not diluting the focus, and to optimise every single visit to a village. The effectiveness of the programme will be gauged by tracking awareness levels before and after *Khushiyon Ki Doli* and by IMRB who will randomly sample 3% of the locations visited. The objective, according to HUL, is more brand building than sales linked.

According to Vats, the programme has already turned on its head a lot of the accepted wisdom about rural outreach. Films used to be a permanent fixture of these programmes to draw people in, but according to Vats, "consumers value something more sharply targeted. Time is clearly a little more precious even in rural India." Congregations around films invariably drew in more men than women — people who were not part of the target audience. Vats says, "The shopper may be male in rural India, but the decision maker for many categories is still the woman. At film shows we got between 300 and 500 people the vast majority of whom were men."

With project Bushfire in the urban markets and *Khushiyon Ki Doli* in the rural, HUL is looking at various ways to remove the underperformer tag that it has recently been saddled with in the Indian market. It remains to be seen if the good old *palkhi* becomes the vehicle to drive it further into the hinterland.

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