

Bushfire Raging in HUL's Belly

Unilever COO, HUL CEO & employees go out into market place to capture consumer insight

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Rajvi Stores is one of the many kirana outlets that dot the residential districts Powai, a suburb in north-eastern Mumbai. On a wet July morning, the men behind the counter were greeted by a slender gentleman in a black T shirt and a cap who fired away a list of probing questions: what was selling well, what was not, what more could be done to drive sales.

If the proprietor of the store irritated, he couldn't show it. For, the eager beaver was no ordinary customer but the CEO of India's largest consumer products company, Hindustan Unilever Ltd (HUL), Nitin Paranjpe. The 47-year-old chief, who had the word Bush Fire embossed on his shirt and cap, was keen to check on two other vital bits of information: how HUL brands were being displayed; and what were competitors offering that HUL wasn't.

"The idea is to work towards perfection in a store," Paranjpe told ET's reporters who accompanied him on his market visit.

In end-July, another head honcho from the Anglo-Dutch parent company took time out for a simi-



MAN WITH A MISSION: Nitin Paranjpe, CEO, HUL

lar exercise - Harish Manwani, the recently anointed chief operating officer at Unilever visited dealers outlets in south Mumbai soon after he landed in the city to announce the Indian affiliate's results for the quarter ended June 2011.

Paranjpe's jaunt is a part of 'Mission Bush Fire', an employee-led market execution and customer interaction exercise initiated in 2010 to get the home & personal care giant to connect with the market place. Like Paranjpe, every one of the 12 members on management committee

goes out every fortnight to get direct feedback on how HUL brands are faring. And down the line, each of HUL's 15,000 employees is being encouraged to put into action this word-of-mouth marketing initiative.

So the next time you visit your friendly-neighborhood grocer don't be startled if you are deftly buttonholed by an ostensible co-shopper who gently cajoles you into buying a

Dove shampoo, Knorr soup or a Kissan spread. From finance to supply chain, HR to information technology, employees are being encouraged to talk about the company's products and brands to friends, meet at least five consumers a month, capture consumer insight and address consumer complaints quickly.

"The exercise gets the entire organisation thinking about how to get sensitive to consumers needs," adds Paranjpe.

Manwani for his part had good reason to join the gang: Unilever has just begun the global roll-out of Project Bush Fire. The initiative is being launched largely in developing and emerging markets, which account for a little over half of Unilever's turnover.

The global parent has clearly been enthused by the results in India. Bush Fire has resulted in a 40% spike in sales in store wherever the initiative has been implemented, according to internal company estimates. Within India, HUL has extended the roll-out to rural markets after seeing it work in urban areas.

"We are putting our entire intellectual horsepower behind the organisation and ensuring that we walk the talk about being consumer-focused," says Manwani.