

A soap for all seasons

PRIYA SHETH

One could be forgiven for thinking 'iconic' is a word used rather casually today when one comes across things and institutions with a hoary old past. One such brand is Lifebuoy, that strong-smelling, stolid, dull red soap that came to life through the energetic ads that were a blur of action, joy, sport and sweat, the last being washed away in a refreshing shower, to the tune of "Tandurusti ki raksha karta hai Lifebuoy..."

So when one comes across an old wrapper of this soap, first introduced in India in early 1895, it's not unnatural to want to know how the brand got to where it is today. In a journey that spans over a 100 years, Lifebuoy moved from being a men's soap to a family soap. Not only did Hindustan Unilever Ltd (HUL) do away with the strong carbolic scent, it also modified the aesthetics of the outer packaging. The result was a contemporary-looking and fresher smelling soap which promised 'continuous protection from germs' for the entire family.

And now for the first time, Lifebuoy is being sold on a 'seasonal' platform with the communication proposition being 'Protection from 10 infection causing germs'.

"This year's proposition is that the soap protects you from ten infections. This is a kind of seasonal campaign. As illnesses vary according to the season, we have chosen to refresh the health message every season. We have now put out a print campaign on cold and cough infections caused in the monsoons," said Sudhir Sitapati, General Manager - Skin Cleansing, HUL, referring to the campaign which started in March 2011.

As of now, the company has only launched print advertisements for the monsoon. The other infections that the company proposes to include in its seasonal campaigns are flu, sore throat, respiratory infection, dysentery, diarrhoea, rash, skin infection, sore eyes, pimples and ear infection.

In the intensely competitive soap industry, HUL has stuck to its health mission and made a niche market for its iconic brand, Lifebuoy.



Lifebuoy's latest strategy is to spread the word about how it can ward off infections in the air, changing the ads to go with the weather.

Changing with the times

THE PROPOSITION

"It's about getting the consumers to wash hands five times a day, so that they can be disease-free. There is no direct competitor to Lifebuoy in the market. It's a habit change from a regular soap to an antiseptic soap," says Sitapati.

Although Lifebuoy has stuck to its base proposition over the years, analysts say it has not been able to keep many of its urban audiences interested.

"Today, Lifebuoy's base proposition is questioned. India has moved on from the era of *Jai Jawan, Jai Kisan*. In urban India, Lifebuoy has become 'yet another soap'," said Harish Bijoor, CEO of Harish Bijoor Consults.

Using Lifebuoy

You can use Lifebuoy soap in hot water, you can use it in cold water, you can use it in boiling clothes, you can use it without boiling the clothes, you can use it in any method old and new; in fact you can use it in

your own special manner, and the result will be clean sweet linen white as driven snow. Its daily use in every household will be found to conduce in every way to health, long life and happiness."

(Directions for use printed on the first soap packs of Lifebuoy.)

Since 1894 Lifebuoy has largely remained the quintessential men's bathing bar. Moving from men (carbolic soap bar) to milder and more acceptable variants was essential for the heritage brand to be accepted by the entire family. The challenge was to effect the change, while retaining the core - its disinfectant properties. So the core audience moved from men battling grime and dirt to mothers chasing a healthy soap to ensure their children don't get infected. The year was 2002.

Since the conscious re-launch, the brand claims to have grown by over 30 and 20 per cent in the first two years. The second major milestone was in 2004, when Lifebuoy was re-launched with four variants and all the

variants came under one 'umbrella' look. According to HUL, this too was a big success in both sales and image association terms.

According to a Euromonitor report, the bath and showers category grew by 11 per cent in 2010 and bar soaps make up 80-90 per cent of this category. "Euromonitor data also shows that the size of the soap industry is Rs 9,200 crore. Lifebuoy is a Rs 1,200-crore brand," said Sreekanth PVS, IFMCG analyst, Angel Broking.

FALLING VALUE SHARE

Given the category and the competitiveness therein, it's not surprising that Lifebuoy has attempted to refresh itself every few years. Over the years, there are many campaigns from the brand that are fresh in public memory, right from the sweaty players on the football field to the Little Gandhi advertisements.

"If you compare Lifebuoy with Dettol soap in terms of value share, it can be seen that the value share for Lifebuoy has actually declined over the last three years as compared to Dettol," said Sreekanth. The value share of Lifebuoy in 2007 was 12.7 per cent and in 2010 it was 11.8 per cent. The value

share of Dettol, on the other hand, has increased. In 2007 it was 5 per cent and in 2010 it was 7.9 per cent.

Keeping in mind Lifebuoy's heritage and lineage, analysts think that if HUL wants to improve its sales in the urban markets it should position the soap as a retro soap rather than a modern soap.

RURAL MARKETS

For Lifebuoy, which has a pan-India presence, the rural markets make up more than half of its overall sales. There are a lot of challenges that the soap faces in these markets.

"In rural markets we have to build a relevance of germs. In the case of urban markets a lot of people understand that germs cause illness. In rural markets we have to explain to people that there are things called germs and if you don't wash your hands they will cause illness. Basic health and hygiene communication in rural markets is a challenge. It's a big task, especially for the ones who are media-dark and do not have access to television," explains HUL's Sitapati. The Swasthya Chetna campaign has spread a lot of awareness of the brand in rural areas.

Although the product quality is the same, the company does have cheaper variants of Lifebuoy in rural areas. Lifebuoy is available in 38-gm stock keeping units that cost Rs 5, in rural areas.

In the rural markets too, analysts believe there are many other soaps that attract the attention of young farmers. "Every communication strategy has an expiry date and even young farmers in rural India prefer using 'young' soaps such as Jai which has the jingle 'Pehla pyaar...'," said Bijoor.

HUL has another set of challenges when it comes to the hand wash category. The biggest challenge is to develop the Indian hand wash market. In a scenario where liquid has a penetration of only two to three per cent, the big worry is to get more Indians to use the liquid.

The company believes that hand wash is a largely urban phenomenon and that the category is nascent. Although it doesn't block sales in rural India, it believes rural sales will take time.