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You don't get to 500 million friends without making a few enemies - The Social Network. In the case of HUL, you don't get millions in sales, without making a few million friends. Somewhere between a global mandate and a very local need to innovate, India's largest FMCG is trying to plant a flag in every single digital outpost that exists

how to make friends and influence people

Ravi Balakrishnan

AFTER wrapping up the first edition of Cornetto Luv Reels, the team at Hindustan Unilever temporarily forgot about the facebook page it had created for the activity. It's the sort of oversight that would have digital agencies and consultants wringing their hands in despair, one that the brand was lucky to recover from. HUL kicked off the programme, blending the young Cornetto consumers' interest in reality TV and the world of films. The marketer opted to keep the programme completely online. Consumers could upload pictures, scripts, story concepts on a website, connect via facebook and vote for their favourites. Films based on these ideas and starring actors discovered via the programme were screened on MTV. The team at

HUL quite naturally assumed it was the end. Except, it wasn't. Months later, without any encouragement from the company, the community on facebook was still going strong: much to HUL's surprise. It was something of a revelation: unlike offline branded activities, there was potentially no end to a programme with an online component. Punit Mishra, category head - ice creams, HUL says "We now realise we are on to a big thing and are making it larger." HUL began to actively engage with its facebook fans yet again and is currently working on Season 2 of Cornetto Luv Reels, which at the time of going to print had a little over 3 lakh fans.

The renewed focus on digital at HUL has stirred things up. It's sending grizzled veterans of marketing and branding back to the drawing board and in some cases, back to the classroom where they find themselves being taught by

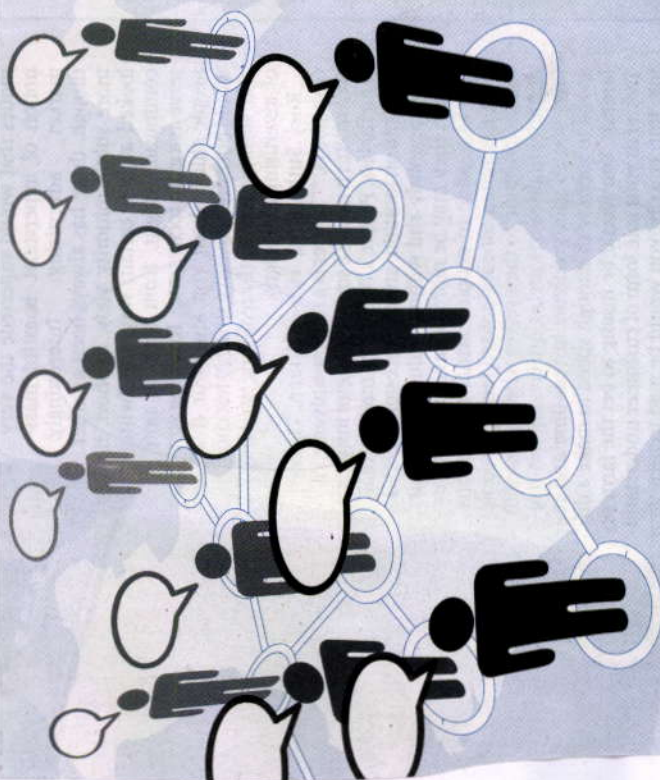
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some of their young colleagues. Misra admits wryly, "This is one space where the pyramid turns upside down and it starts with the youngest one on the team." HUL is reckoned to be a little late to the party but is trying to make up for lost time. It has increased total spends on digital media — tripled them according to some industry sources. Of course, the statistic is rendered slightly less impressive since digital is the runt of the litter in Indian marketing. The most liberal estimate pegs spends by all marketers at

a meagre ₹ 900 crore; just 4% of India's total marketing budget.

However, the number of people on digital platforms is getting hard to ignore. Says Srikanth Shrinivasamadhavan, general manager - media services, HUL, "It's fairly obvious that this is the medium of the future from a reach perspective." Beerajaah Sswain, vice president - digital and emerging media, Omnicom Media Group, points out that Facebook alone added five million Indian users in a

month, and the profile of people signing up is becoming far more broadbased. FMCG the last bastion to resist going online cannot help but succumb according to Sswain: "Viewership of YouTube doubled in a year's time. It's like TV but with an added layer of interactivity. If you pit it against a niche TV channel, it completely wins."

Which is probably why YouTube now figures in HUL's online plans. The video sharing site has been a destination for pirated films

which amass impressive views before being hit by an inevitable takedown notice. HUL decided to officially sponsor the Salman Khan hit *Dabangg*. Viewers had the convenience of watching the film at a time of their choosing. And yet the experience was rendered, for better or worse, remarkably TV-like, with ads for Knorr, Ponds and Clinic All Clear playing every 20 to 30 minutes.

First name:

Last name:

Your Email:

re-enter Email:

New password:

I am:

Birth day:

Why do I need to provide my birthday?

Create a Page for a celebrity, band or business.



Digital Revolutions

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If *Dabangg* on YouTube sounds a little too much like replicating TV online, HUL is more ambitious on other brands. To coincide with its new Googly variant on Axe, it has launched the Googly app. Among the significant challenges in app creation is coming up with something that won't require a powerhouse phone and which takes no more than 45 seconds to download. Srinandam Sundaram, category head - deos and oral care, HUL says both variant and app have emerged from insights gleaned on Axe Angel's Club, HUL's nearly 1.5 million strong facebook community: "Instead of us telling fans what's great about Axe, we've become better listeners."

If fan acquisition mode dominated 2010, the current phase is one of conversation. HUL keeps up a near constant barrage of communication via posts, carefully examining which lines and themes are most popular. The company is also taking some of its less obviously online-friendly brands like Close-Up, Sure and Pepsodent to digital media. The number of fans may be significantly lower than those of Axe, but that's not something brand teams are losing sleep over. According to Sundaram, "What we go by is how many people respond, positive or negative? If you look at the self serve ads, you know whether you are going right or wrong. You can see quality and patterns of engagement."

Engaging with kids brings an entirely different set of challenges. HUL has thrown in online gaming into a mix that also includes customised branded content for ice cream brand Paddle Pop. For the last three years, the company has created a one hour film starring the lion, Paddle Pop's mascot. These films are screened on Cartoon Network. Misra says with a measure of pride, "The TV ratings of the film were higher than Harry Potter IV." HUL has taken Paddle Pop online with games built around the world of the brand. The Paddle Pop Gaming League that's in its fourth year now, culminates in an offline challenge. Misra says, "Going after a young audience made it easy to get online. That kids are into gaming is an idea available to every brand. But we had the richness of branded entertainment.

With gaming, the Paddle Pop world became a two way interaction." Misra adds; "It's expensive to do a film, but it is a property worth investing and building. We average 9.2 minutes on the site." The online-offline formula has worked for the brand particularly in Mumbai, formerly not a big market for Paddle Pop. "If you ask a classic marketing question on what the ROI is, it is very difficult to quantify," admits Misra. "On TV you can quote GRP figures. But here you have to experiment."

HUL's online strategy is not without its share of critics. A fairly common critique is that the company reacts a tad too slowly and that there have been times when the mainstream advertising seems to be operating at a remove from online branding. V Ramani, vice chairman and managing director, Ignitee says, "If seen individually, there's a lot of good work on quite a few pieces. But strategically there appears to be a big hole. Quite a few of their products talk to the same person - the homemaker. The digital platform, especially social media allows the homemaker to be enveloped via multiple products. On TV you still need to demonstrate each of them separately. Here you can talk to homemakers as a combined entity on a group basis."

A digital consultant who does not wish to be identified says, "HUL depends on large ad networks operating in the digital space which can be a big deterrent to some of their key brands going the whole hog. More than anything else, at a brand management level, they need hardcore induction from strong local digital players on what the medium can do, how it operates, and this needs to be at a regular interval."

While HUL did manage to reel in the fans from Cornetto Luv Reels, it could have just as well have ended disastrously, with all the effort in amassing a bunch of fans and loyalists coming to naught.

With digital becoming less of a flash in the pan at HUL, the scope for great success or spectacular failure are ever present. With the rules still being written, it is anybody's game online. Old world values like legacy and trust mean less and less in a world that's bursting at the seams with distractions du jour.