



Cleanliness is becoming a big part of the fabric of life: HUL's Narasimhan

In a Q&A, Prabha Narasimhan, ED & VP-Home Care, South Asia, Hindustan Unilever, says while Indians have adopted the new habit of sanitising, the hygiene story in the country is still evolving

Namrata Kohli | New Delhi April 05, 2021 Last Updated at 18:47 IST



Did
the
Covid-
19

Prabha Narasimhan, Executive Director & VP-Home Care, South Asia, Hindustan Unilever Limited

pandemic usher a sweeping change in people's cleanliness habits? Well, yes and no, Prabha Narasimhan, Executive Director & VP-Home Care, South Asia, Hindustan Unilever Limited, tells Namrata Kohli in an interview. She adds that while Indians have adopted the new habit of sanitising, the hygiene story in the country is still an evolving one. Edited Excerpts:

Would it be right to assume that Coronavirus brought about a hygiene revolution of sorts in the country, the real Swachhta abhiyaan? Is there a behavioural change towards hygiene now?

Indeed, there has been a fundamental shift, whether it is handwashing or sanitising, laundry, cleansing the home, the surfaces of the skin. We are seeing that "cleanliness" is becoming much more a part of the "fabric" of people's life, pun unintended. Hygiene consciousness has grown immensely--today, 65-70 per cent of urban households show enhanced hygiene consciousness and fall under 'Hygiene Warriors' or 'super Hygienists'. In retrospect, there are three types of consumer behaviour patterns emerging now. The first type typically looks for clinical disinfection and is hygiene obsessive. They are the ones wiping, spraying and disinfecting anything and everything with a heightened sense of awareness, driven either by circumstance

(such as having vulnerable people at home) or a mindset that says that in a moment like this, we need to be proactive. The second category consists of people in the middle literally—they feel hygiene is important and are taking action and adding more steps to their routine. For example, we have seen the frequency of floor cleaning and toilet cleaning has increased, surfaces that didn't get wiped earlier such as door knobs, light switches have started to get wiped. We have seen that big change but this type of consumer is actually not looking for clinical disinfection but for that which is safe and gives them the feeling of their home being protected. And the third set of consumers are hygiene-complacent.

Did Surf Excel help people surf through the pandemic? Which were your best-selling categories?

Last year, as the schools got closed and people started working from home, we found all the in-home categories—whether it was dishwash, handwash or sanitisation—increased quite dramatically. However, the laundry segment (such as Surf and all) did not increase that much and in fact plateaued a little bit because of reduced mobility. As mobility resumes, transportation comes back, we are witnessing the laundry category bouncing back sharply as consumers get out more for work. The link to laundry is quite high to mobility while the link to the others is more about in-home consumption.

In the categories where we saw the maximum traction and actually the fastest growth in sales were things like floor, toilet cleaners and surface sprays. As a matter of fact, the surface spray category did not exist pre-pandemic.

But there is still room for more hygiene products to be adopted at homes. The branded floor cleaners, for instance, still exist in only one out of five homes in the country. There's more room for adoption of even a surface cleaner, a surface disinfectant, a spray or a wipe. We launched an entire new set of products for the consumers looking for clinical disinfection- anti-bacterial dishwash bars, Domex wipes, Domex disinfectant spray and even aerosol sprays.

India is no stranger to hygiene and “Cleanliness is next to Godliness” encapsulates the very essence of Indian ethos and lifestyle. Did the Covid pandemic in 2020 lead us to reclaim our past?

My answer would be yes and no. Some of the habits we knew and we understood really got emphasised such as handwashing. Indeed, handwashing has become quite a part of our routine. And so, simple habits like that just got heightened awareness and therefore were done more often.

Some new ones got introduced and the sanitising habit is new. It just didn't exist earlier. Earlier if you were not within reach of water, one would have just left it perhaps. But I do think there is room for improvement. There can be accelerated focus on the way we deal with our surfaces, floors, toilets, door knobs and other frequently touched surfaces. I think that's an evolving journey.

Indians have some of the most elaborate cleaning rituals in the world, historically. But there is a difference in the way people think and behave when it comes to personal and public hygiene. And public hygiene still remains a big challenge, which in turn affects public health. Some people attribute it to lack of water. Is the because of lack of resources or plain lack of will?

I am finding it hard to put a singular answer to it. I do think we are getting better. I think there is some way for us to go but the big shift has happened. Everybody has come to realise that their personal safety depends on how much care they take of themselves and surroundings. A personal observation is that you see less people spitting on the road or more people wearing mask and even places being less crowded. There is an improvement in the idea of public space hygiene.

Many people have this fear psychosis that their skin will get spoilt on exposure to harmful chemicals and toxins. A slew of green products have been launched to address this fear. How do you respond to the green movement?

We launched a full transversal product range under the Nature Protect banner, which includes floor cleaner, fruits and vegetable cleaner, surface disinfectant spray, wipes, laundry detergent. We launched the anti-germ wash booster as well as the Lifebuoy laundry sanitizer and activated the Rin, powered by Neem extracts. The

cleaning power of these come from plant-based sources and there is no premium, it is priced at the belly of the market.

This line of product primarily talks the most to the middle segment which is looking for disinfection that they believe is safe and suitable for their homes. Since we saw a lot of traction in the dishwash category which was led, not so much by hygiene, as much by the fact that more consumers were in home, more meals were being cooked at home and more food was being eaten at home; obviously the attendant outcome was an increase in dishwash detergent and soap. We responded by launching an anti-bacterial dish wash bar from Vim which again has done very well and exceeded our expectations from the time of launch. These have done well but I must say that the quantum is relatively small when compared to the size of the overall category.

However, there is a difference between anti-bacterial and green. Green is a part of the overall clean future agenda at HUL and sustainable living is multiyear agenda. We are committed to that for a decade and beyond. We have a role to play in cleaning up cleaning.

Was there anything that surprised, shocked or amused you about the way consumers behaved in 2020?

We were a little bit surprised by the rocketing sales of sanitiser at the height of pandemic last year. While we do not expect this to continue, we do expect that the handwashing habit will endure for a long time.

My amazement was most at how well the women in particular have coped with the added responsibility during this pandemic. They found themselves doing everything that they were doing earlier. But also became the superstar chefs cooking special dishes for people at home, besides taking care and becoming the protector of the home in its entirety, keeping germs at bay, disinfecting homes to managing the wellbeing of an entire family which was spending so much more time at home. I must confess that across the board, the stories on how women coped and how they have, by and large, done such a fabulous job during the entire pandemic has been quite incredible. A lot was asked of them and a lot was given.