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## HUL taps AI for its Shikhar app to help kirana stores to lure more buyers to shops

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In a bid to empower kirana stores and enhance ordering frequency, Hindustan Unilever (HUL) has introduced an AI (artificial intelligence)-powered enhancement to its homegrown eB2B app, Shikhar, Executive Director Arun Neelakantan told Moneycontrol in an interview. The latest update allows retailers to generate AI-driven personalized promotions, helping them engage directly with shoppers, improve store visibility, and drive higher sales. Beyond increasing retailer engagement, HUL is actively tracking order frequency to ensure retailers move beyond monthly purchases to multiple orders per week. Currently, 70 percent of its retailer partners place monthly orders, a number the company anticipates will rise with this update. "The retailers need to have a Ways and Means of attracting shoppers....we used AI because that is the only way and means where you will be able to develop capabilities, which is scalable.&nbsp;1.4 million retailers, you will need to build something that's customizable for all of them," said&nbsp; Neelakantan. He explained that the retailers can upload a photo of themselves in the app, which then allows the system to identify and display available offers and products in their store. They can further personalize and customize these promotions before sharing them with their customer base. "The idea behind is making sure that we give retailers an opportunity to enhance the off takes from their stores. So you get access to more shoppers, you get access to more products that are available," added&nbsp;Neelakantan. The app, launched in 2017, boasts close to 1.4 million&nbsp;stores and is used across the country by urban and rural retailers. The&nbsp;maker of Surf Excel and Clinic Plus derives 75 percent of its revenue from the Kirana store sales. Last year, the HUL management had flagged that the core focus remains on maintaining strong ties with kirana stores and traditional distributors, amid rising dominance from e-commerce and quick commer players. The industry leader, derives two-third of its business from general trade. "The heart of HUL's business is with our kirana merchants, said CEO Rohit Jawa, in a post-earnings call in October last year. "The intent of it is to make sure that we give access to a larger assortment and make sure consumers and the shoppers are aware of the kind of assortment that's available in the store,"Neelakantan. According to him,&nbsp;the app&nbsp;allows retailers to make frequent purchases without holding large inventories, enabling them to manage smaller stock levels while improving cash flow. This, in turn, helps them rotate capital more efficiently. "How do you actually get them to sell more is through all of these activations is to help ensure that the kirana store communicates to the shopper, communicates to their own user base that exists and make sure that the shoppers are aware of the kind of offers that are existing," he added.