

Date	Headline	Publication	Edition	Page No.	Journalist	MAV
Online						
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Online

Published Date:	1 May 2026	Publication:	Fortune India []
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Circulation:	0		

Priya Nair's 'transform and modernise HUL' strategy pays off

<https://www.fortuneindia.com/business-news/priya-nairs-transform-and-modernise-hul-strategy-pays-off/135387>

At her first quarterly presentation in October last year, Hindustan Unilever's MD and CEO, Priya Nair, had said that she had spent most of her time travelling across the country meeting consumers and the trade, ever since she took over the reign of the country's largest FMCG company.

This was also the time when retailers and distributors across the country talked about how HUL brands were losing market share. They were losing share to smaller direct-to-consumer brands and regional brands.

The company was losing market share to challenger brands such as NatHabit or Mamaearth in categories like haircare and skincare. In detergents, there were regional challengers to not just mass brands such as Wheel or Rin, even premium a brand such as Surf Excel was being challenged by the likes of Fena in North India.

The latter had a washing machine as well as a liquid variant, was placed right next to Surf Excel on the retail shelves and by virtue of its competitive pricing, had more takers. These trends would have obviously caught Nair's attention during her travels. She came back with a decision to modernise and transform HUL's core brands with modern looks and designs. "It will be done both through renovation and innovation," she had said.

She had also talked about overhauling its frontline marketing and sales machine to make it future fit. Ever since she has taken over as HUL's MD, Nair has hardly met the media. She wants to perform first and then do interviews, her team has maintained. The Q4FY26 results of HUL definitely indicate that Nair has managed to move the growth needle - With a turnover of ₹16,207 crore, an underlying sales growth of 7% and volume growth of 6%, the FMCG major has registered its highest growth in the last 12 quarters. Profit after tax has up by 20%.

Nair attributes the growth to the measures the company has taken. "There are two factors - one is the fiscal monetary measures which have overleveraged better consumer demand and the second is the doubling down of the moves we have made.

There are four things we have called out - stepping up our resource on a few priorities and the second is brands. We have ensured our brands stay modern and relevant, both in terms of how we talk to consumers and what segments they are operating in" She cites the example of Dove Shampoo, where they have launched a variant targeted at people with curly hair.

"We have also stepped up our focus on building omni-channel capability. We not only have a dedicated team for quick commerce and ecommerce, we are also investing in GT (general trade) capabilities. We have set up a dedicated team for open format chemist stores, these are resulting in us being able to step up our growth," she adds.

Create modern desirable brands, double down on fewer bigger bets and accelerating frontline machine has been HUL's growth mantra under Nair's leadership. Be it Vaseline Cloud Soft with SPF 50 or Horlicks Protein, she promises to

create desire at scale.

While predecessor and mentor, Sanjiv Mehta (for MD, Hindustan Unilever) passionately spoke about winning in many Indias, Nair, announced the Unified India Model. “It is a simplification we have done on our reporting structure. We have announced four CMOs (chief marketing officers) for each of our business groups who would report to the business head, who in turn report to me. We have also unveiled an R&D set-up for India. So, we are leveraging our scale as Unilever and also simplifying our decision-making. It is focused on scale, agility and we continue to benefit from everything that we are as an MNC,” she explains.

As HUL modernized and transformed its brands in the last few quarters, it also upped its digital and social media spends. “We will invest in marketing which is social first so that our brands are discovered online,” Nair had earlier said. Today, it is associated with over 30,000 content creators and its influencer generated assets have doubled.

HUL’s efforts to modernize and stay relevant would continue. Nair cites the example of a category such as homecare which has 100% penetration. She still sees immense opportunity for growth.

“Our focus would be to increase usage from bars to powders to liquids. Liquids is a focus for us and we will double down, even premium powder. There is a very large mass powder market in the country, our focus is to premiumise the powder market. Even fabric conditioners. You don’t grow value on just core categories but also adjacent categories, as consumers want more benefits,” she explains.

The Middle-East crisis has had its impact on the business, with lot of HUL’s ingredients being by-products of crude. The short-term may see re-balancing between volume and price growth. But given its robust financial position, the company is confident of navigating the current situation. In fact, it has reiterated its guidance of fiscal year 2027 to be better than fiscal year 2026.

Nair says her vision is clearly long-term. “We are taking multi-year bets because we are talking about developing the market. The biggest opportunity for HUL is that the CPG per capita consumption is significantly lower than what it is in other countries. As market leaders, it will be our benefit to grow the company.”