

Usage of Opinion Leaders as a Marketing Tool in Rural Markets of India

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This article provides a critical overview of the current practices of marketers in designing and executing marketing communications. It reviews existing literature on consumer behaviour and opinion leadership. Dimensions of opinion leadership and traits of rural consumers are discussed. This brings out the significant role of opinion leaders in influencing rural consumer behaviour. This article proposes a cost effective stepwise framework in usage of consumer behaviour influencing dimensions of opinion leadership to enable rapid transition of consumers through the buying process.

Key Words: Marketing communications, consumer-behaviour, opinion leadership, consumer influence, rural consumers

Introduction

Promotions, one of the four major pillars of marketing, have traditionally revolved around outdoor, in-store, print, electronic and online media advertisements and Below the Line (BTL) activities like free samples, trials, demos etc for creating awareness of new product as well as existing products and brands. Media plan for new product launch is invariably restricted to prolonged discussions and detailed workings towards arriving at allocations primarily amongst these options. Of late innovative customer engagement programmes, as part of the BTL portfolio are gaining practice to enhance brand recall, induce brand switch, impulse and trial purchases and to lead the consumer progressively towards instilling brand loyalty and brand advocacy.

Return on Marketing Investments is not very scientifically measured in most Indian businesses with stress primarily on carving out sizeable budgets for marketing resorting to grandiose projections and justifications and thereafter, when budget gets allocated the stress shifts to monitoring on execution for timely and complete consumption of marketing budget over the relevant budget period. In the present days of hyper competition most businesses are left with wafer thin margins. In such environment, investible surplus is scarce and annual budgets finalization process is therefore closely contested (read fought) by sales, marketing, R&D, HR, production and others. Thus cost effective marketing activities is the need of the hour.

This paper explores consumer behavior in rural markets and theorizes the higher effectiveness of usage of Opinion Leaders in reaching out to prospective customers with both new and existing products with greater ease and higher willing acceptance. We shall examine the dimensions of opinion leadership and followership in the social and consumer buying behavior context, in some detail. But first, we shall recollect some basic concepts of consumer buying behavior, which are relevant for better understanding of the current topic.

Consumer Buying Behaviour

Consumer Buying Behaviour is the in depth study of decisions made by individuals for purchase of consumption items. It is of prime importance in marketing to design and offer innovative solutions to consumers in order to secure long term customer relationship.

Consumer Buying Behaviour is influenced by several important factors viz. cultural, social, personal and psychological.

- Culture is the set of broad guidelines, norms, values, beliefs and conduct exhibited by members of a group. Conformity to group norms in most aspects of consumption like food, clothing, lifestyle etc are practiced by members who while influencing one another and are greatly influenced in turn by custodians of their culture.
- Society comprises of family, relatives, neighbours, colleagues, friends and social

groups. Group dynamics such as membership reference groups to which an individual belongs, aspiration reference group to which he aspires to belong, disclaimant reference group of which he is a member but does not want to belong and avoidance group about which he resents values and beliefs play a very powerful role in influencing buying behavior.

- Personal factors of age, sex, education, lifecycle stage, and lifestyle contribute to varying extents of influence in buying behavior.
- Psychological factors of individuals like beliefs, attitudes, perceptions and motivation are also subject to influence by others in shaping buying behavior.

While the above factors influence the buying behavior of individuals, the stages in buying decision process that an individual goes through are given in Fig.1. below:

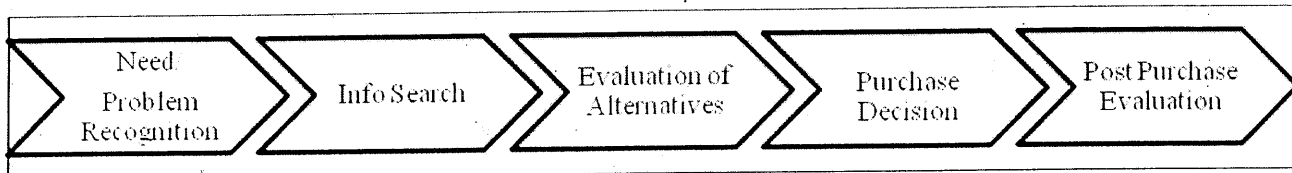


Fig.1: Stages in Consumer Buying Behaviour

The individual is influenced in each stage in varying degrees but is most influenced in the info search and evaluation stages. Information is gathered from various sources like commercial sources viz. advertisements and BTL event experiences, public sources and personal sources. Personal sources include the influences of members of groups covered in social factors. However all purchase decisions need not go through all the stages in Fig.1. Routinised habitual buying behavior involving regularly purchased, non differentiated, inexpensive low involvement product category typically bypasses these stages. Variety seeking buying behavior for similar product category incorporates elements

of fun, change, difference in flavor, perfume, colour, design, look and feel etc., without much emphasis on qualitative differentiation.

As opposed to the above buying behaviours, extensive problem solving buying behaviour is nurtured on a high buyer involvement, with extensive research and cost benefit analysis, for high value, high impact, relatively unfamiliar products which are infrequently purchased, expensive and the buyer perceives significant differentiation amongst brands.

It is in this category of products that buyers actively seek information and are greatly influenced. We shall examine dimensions of opinion leader influence in personal and farm consumption, in this high involvement category of products and build up a case in favour of development and usage of opinion leaders as an effective tool for new product adoption.

Opinion Leadership

Opinion Leadership is defined as "the degree to which an individual is able to influence other individuals' opinions or behaviour in a preferred

way with relative frequency" (Rogers, 1962). It is typically exhibited in individuals by the following dimensions:

- Tremendous passion in their area of interest
- Seek and possess vast knowledge in the area
- Continual updation of knowledge by high exposure to print and online media
- Higher consumer innovativeness in terms of early new product adoption
- Significantly higher level of social interaction
- Burning desire to share the acquired knowledge and latest developments
- An individuated personality with

- distinctiveness, individuality, confidence and uniqueness
- Excellent logical conversation skills
- Enjoys trust, respect and affection in society
- Advice and guidance are willingly accepted by opinion seekers.

Whereas opinion leader (OL) influence is evident in most product categories and socio-cultural groups, it is widely prevalent in rural communities and thus acquires greater importance as a marketing tool over conventional advertisements and promotions in rural markets.

Influence of OL on Rural Consumers

All consumers, whether urban or rural, are continuously bombarded by a profusion of brand communications, through print, electronic, outdoor media and progressively through online media as well. Such exposure is not found wanting in rural areas. Urban consumers rapidly soak-in advertisements, exhibit greater individualism in choice of brand in a product category, based on his elevated sense of general awareness and need to display uniqueness, have easier access to internet for evaluation of alternatives resulting in higher consumer innovativeness. Rural consumers, on the contrary, progress to several rounds discussions and are not quickly moved to take a buying decision, based on exposure to advertisements. Rural consumers are hampered by limited internet access, and lower knowledge of English language. They await and seek trustworthy unbiased advice from opinion leaders, for which understanding of their social dynamics and buying behaviour is needed.

Rural consumers are characterized by the following traits:

- Perception of lack of adequate information of products
- Limited access to internet and specialized magazines
- Higher levels of skepticism of new offerings

- Higher distrust on communication by business organizations
- Higher conservatism and lower consumer innovativeness in new product adoption
- Seeking value for money options over novelty purchases
- Higher levels of socializing, caring, mutual support and shared problem solving
- Influenced by a culture of moderation and a propensity to save

Such characteristics make rural consumers good risk averse opinion seekers, who seek reinforcement of their attitude towards a brand. They actively seek out opinion leaders for their greater knowledge and experience with the brand. Once influenced by OLs, opinion seekers thereafter display a rapid positive disposition towards the brand.

Conclusions

Having discussed dimensions of OL and rural opinion seeker consumers, it is now pertinent to state that there is limited impact of traditional media to lead a rural consumer through the later stages of buying behaviour. Advertisement creates brand awareness which induces some discussions on the brand's suitability to provide solution to their unmet needs and wants, but progress thereafter is largely restricted in case of high involvement category products.

Marketers could do well enable rapid transition of such consumers through the next stages to actualize a positive disposition towards a brand, by effective usage of Consumer Behaviour influencing dimensions of Opinion Leadership. Activation of this marketing tool can be very cost effectively carried out in the following steps :

1. Set up call center for providing information in vernacular languages, to be accessed by toll free phone numbers or SMS, to be displayed in advertisements.
2. Release advertisements to a limited extent in outdoor, electronic and print media

including vernacular channels, newspapers and magazines, to create brand awareness.

3. Identify rural opinion leaders, for each major rural market, from amongst progressive farmers, academicians, professionals, social workers, leaders of cooperatives etc. through field survey by marketing representatives and also from those innovative consumers have made voluntary contacts with call center.
4. Institute exhaustive information sharing mechanism with such OLs and innovative customers, through emails, seminars, exhibitions, fairs, promotional events etc.
5. Arrange hands-on product/solution demonstrations and field trials on sustained basis for OLs. Clarify all doubts and wipe out all suspected traces of residual preference for legacy solutions and competing brands from the minds of OLs.
6. Arrange sessions to showcase product demonstrations for rural consumers with OLs leading conversations around their positive experience with the brand. Create opportunities for OLs to effect public diffusion of product innovation in social gatherings.
7. Institute regular feedback and feed-forward mechanisms with OLs. Be alert for signs of initiation of negative communication, which spreads rapidly and causes devastation to a brand's reputation. Early information can help in quick rectification of harm caused.

OLs are motivated by thirst for knowledge and esteem. The above steps fulfill these motives of the OL and increase their brand stickiness. Development of OLs results in generation of significant influence of followers through perceived unbiased evaluation that they trust and recommendation of the brand leading to enhanced customer actualizations. Usage of OL as a marketing tool thus ensures accrual of prolonged benefits to the brand by cost effective

use of scarce resources through segment specific targeting of marketing initiatives. We can therefore express:

Rural Consumer = f (Brand Awareness, OL influence, acceptability, accessibility, Buying Behaviour, availability, affordability)

Marketing initiatives, using the tool of OLs aided with convenient accessibility, availability, robust logistics, service network and pricing perceived by rural consumers as value for money will go a long way to ensure success in rural marketing of high involvement product categories in general and in launch of new products in the category in particular.

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