

# Conversing with rural masses



Rural communication has different dimensions.

**V Mukunda Das** talks about implications of marketing communications by urban marketers to rural consumers and various dimensions of marketing communication

**R**ural areas are not homogenous in terms of caste and community, compensation, level of development, population density, total population, caste and community, education of men and women, rigidity of the value system and their impact on formal and informal communication.

The theories of communication enunciate that every communication has a sender and receiver, but what the sender intends through a communication, should be received by the receiver in totality. Over

the last two decades, studies done on several aspects of marketing communication reaching rural consumers highlight certain aspects of effective marketing communication.

This can well be illustrated by a story of a family planning campaign in rural South India. The hoarding was kept very close to the place where rural women used to come and fetch water. The purpose was to give visibility to the communication message to the rural women, so that they would also think of family planning measures to limit their family. The hoarding shows two children and their parents in a happy mood. The message was 'small family happy family', designed by an urban media person. The expected change in the receiver - rural women, was to feel that if you have two children, they also will have a happy family.





The urban communicator did not consider the psyche of the rural women in those areas, where the average family size, was five persons per family. Women who came to see the advertisement stated – ‘How sad, this lady has only two children.’ What went wrong?

Market research studies revealed the disconnect and this was a great lesson to many urban communicators - to change the strong and rigid belief system that ‘a larger family is good’, cannot be changed through such communications.

### STIFF BARRIERS

The biggest challenge in communicating to rural consumers is the difference in their values and belief system, partly due to the environmental difference between urban and rural living.

Here is yet another example to illustrate my point. An urban communicator wanted parents in Rajasthan to provide nutritional supplement to their children. It was decided to distribute a nutrition supplement to enhance the health of the child. The communication showed a red child on one side of the poster, and a green child on the other side. Drawing inference from traffic signals, the communicator wanted to show that the red child is undesirable, just as the red signal signifies ‘no’. And as the green signifies ‘yes’, a ‘green child’ is desirable. However, this advertisement failed miserably. In the values

and perceptions of the rural people in the target location, a ‘red child’ is desirable as it shows a child with sufficient blood in the body. These then were two examples that illustrated/proved my point. There are dozens of similar examples of such urban communications failing in rural areas, because of a disconnect from the target audience.

A long time back, when television was first introduced in a village in rural Gujarat, the author and his team conducted a study, which showed several other dimensions. Close observations and discussions with the audience who observed urban product advertisements on TV, revealed that the rural audience do not understand the meaning or message of such communication. Therefore these failed to create any positive impact and the desired impact in explaining the product features or inducing them to purchase the

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product. Many of these urban advertisements did not connect with the mind of the potential rural customers. Although rural customers consist of potential female consumers, we should not forget rural reality, that the decision making power of rural women folk, is almost negligible. Advertising companies have to understand that there is a vast difference in culture, belief, value for money between urban and rural people. Creating a visual advertisement similar to one that is shown on TV, is like a dream for the rural consumers- it often lacks rural reality.

#### PERCEPTIVE DISTORTION

There are a few things which urban communicators need to understand. Urban life and urban consumers are in a different socio-cultural context compared to the specifics in rural India. Studies have shown

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that there is a 'perceptive distortion' of urban marketing communications in rural consumers, where the mind is influenced/modulated by many local realities. It may be mentioned that north east India follows the matriarchal system and therefore, in reality, women are more 'empowered' by the legacy of the social value system. However, in the same India, the role of women is totally different in the rural areas of states such as Rajasthan. Therefore, the homogeneity parameters and dimensions generally found in marketing communications for urban India cannot be transferred to rural India. As purchasers of urban consumer products, the rural population is influenced by many more heterogeneous socio-cultural dimensions.

However the only change in trend today, is that the present generation, youngsters in rural areas, who have urban contacts, act as a link. They become opinion leaders and interpreters of urban-styled communication to rural folk.

Marketing communications to rural India, therefore, needs to understand the implications of the dynamics evolved in specifics of rural India. It cannot be like an all-terrain-all-weather vehicle, travelling through urban and rural India, using the same logic. ▀

*(The writer has about three decades of experience in researching on different dimensions of rural India. Currently, he is the Director of Chandragupt Institute of Management Patna. Swati Sumi has assisted him in preparing this article.)*