

"Business and marketing cross over in FMCG"

An interview with Anuradha Aggarwal, chief marketing officer, Marico.

By Ashwini Gangal



Anuradha Aggarwal joined Marico as chief marketing officer around six months back, replacing Sameer Satpathy at the time.

With around 18 years of experience in marketing, Aggarwal has had an interesting ride so far. After acquiring a strong foundation in marketing at Unilever (where she spent 12 years), she moved to Vodafone (during which time her team created around 70 ads), and then to Mondelez (where she managed the biscuits portfolio).

Looking back at her Unilever days, she fondly recalls managing Ayush (ayurvedic range), because "that got me interested in running a business as opposed to just having a marketer's view."

Despite having worked across product segments, Anuradha's "heart lies in FMCG."

Why so? "The crossover of business and marketing happens in FMCG," she insists, "unlike in the case telecom and other service industries, where marketing tends to sit outside the operational world."

This year, Marico's media spend is 19 per cent more than it was last year. Interestingly, the company's local marketing efforts, particularly vernacular print advertising, have increased.

Modern trade and e-commerce, together, account for over nine per cent of the company's total business (as of December 2015). Online, Livon Hair Gain is one of Marico's fastest selling brands; over the past four months, 21 per cent of the women's business and 16 per cent of men's business has come from this medium.

A big proponent of consumer research - she prefers calling it "consumer intimacy" - Aggarwal spoke to us about Marico, the brands therein, and the FMCG segment. Edited Excerpts.

How have the past six months been?

For Marico, the coming of a new person, in this role, after a very long time, is new. And for me, working for an Indian, entrepreneurial, professional company, is a new experience.

I've largely been in multi-national companies. So, this has given me a different sort of energy. Now, it is beginning to feel like the buck stops here. Here, we're around eleven people running the business, as opposed to the 'millions' in a really large organisation. Here, it's just us (that is, the executive/management committee) and the board.

And the board doesn't run the business. That's liberating, empowering... and scary.

With all of Marico's brands on your plate, how do you prioritise?

I have two primary mandates. One, that of the chief marketing officer of Marico India, which includes handling the business, marketing, communication, development, media and insight work for all the brands.

Two, that of leading the marketing for our global team, including strategic decision making for some of our portfolios across the world.

Some parts of it need more help than others. Prioritisation is need-based and strategy-based. The need-based part of it is understanding which

brands need help, in terms of... 'Which are the ones which aren't doing so well?' or 'Which are the ones that are not meeting potential?' or 'Which are the ones that can truly do something dramatic in the market?'

Another aspect I spend a lot of time on is new product development. This cuts across countries, categories and channels.

Which are these brands that need help?

Brands where we're not meeting our full potential would include, for instance... a brand like Set Wet. We've found it difficult to cut through. I don't think we've played the game well enough.

We believe the deo category has a lot of juice; so we've done whatever it takes to take this one big pass at it. We've got Ranveer Singh to endorse Set Wet deo - this was one of the things I put into place when I came in. We have a lot riding on this.

When you say you're going to 'work on' a given brand, does it necessarily mean pumping in more media money into it?

It's not just about investing money. You can always throw money at a problem, but that doesn't solve fundamental challenges about differentiation, relevance and giving value to consumers.

The marketer's role is not just to make good advertising and put it on air; it is about making the right propositions come to life for the consumer.

You said in a recent interview that the biggest challenge in the FMCG segment is saturation in terms of consumption and penetration. Does this problem affect some categories over others? And how does a marketer deal with it?

Different categories are in different stages of evolution. For instance, in India, while biscuits have high penetration, it's nowhere near what it is in the US, UK and Europe.

Hair oils in India have almost 100 per cent penetration. In 'high penetration-high consumption' categories like soap and hair oil, the task is to see if we can give value-added benefits to consumers. It could be in the form of branding, proposition or product benefits... this will make them pay more for the product. It's about providing 'value growth' over 'volume growth'. An example of this is our Parachute Ayurvedic hair fall control product, which gives control over hair fall in 30 days. It is about one and a half times the price of our base Parachute oil.

What about the FMCG segment, as it stands today, worries you?

The Indian consumer is going through an amazingly flirtatious phase. There is absolutely no loyalty. That's a trend that can keep a marketer up at night. ■