



The three things that will make an impact on Rural Marketing, on the road to 2010

While growth in Education and infrastructure sectors have been impacting rural India over the years, the impact that Technology is going to have on Rural Marketing initiatives in the next few years is going to be tremendous. Let me elaborate.

Education

The zooming circulation of regional / language newspapers are indication of the growing literacy in Rural India. Thanks to the free primary education policy of the government and other initiatives of some NGOs, more and more children are getting basic education. I read somewhere that more than 50 per cent of the graduates coming out of the colleges of India are from *mofussil* areas. These youngsters are contributing to the growth of the aspiring middle class in rural. Thanks to the satellite television and the knowledge it delivers at home, more and more uneducated women are getting empowered. This trend, started a few years ago is going to only accelerate in the coming years.

Infrastructure

Rural marketers have always found that villages closer to state and national highways are more developed than the villages in the interiors of the countryside, even if they have more population. Because both mean easier access to the villages for all kinds of products and services. The ambitious golden quadrilateral program of the government of India and other initiatives of the state governments are making villages more accessible. This is going to open newer opportunities for rural marketers.

Technology

Technology is going to make a huge difference to the way we look at Rural India. The process has started and in the next three years there will be more progress in this area. There is now a general agreement that the average rural Indian whose life has been touched by technology has changed for the better. The web based technologies and technology of Internet usage for innovative interventions have been quite a boon to people. There are many corporates like ITC, HLL, other NGOs and almost every state government who are experimenting with ICT in rural. It is increasingly becoming clear that for Rural ICT to be successful what is required is the public / private partnership. The Common Service Centre (CSC) Project of the Ministry of Information and Technology, under which the government is planning to set up 1,00,000 internet kiosks in as many villages to service the 6,00,000+ villages of the country is in the right direction. While the government will provide the infrastructure, the leading players in the ICT area like Microsoft, NLogue and many others are expected to provide appropriate technology to help the ICT initiative to succeed. The CSC project is not only going to help in good governance but also help empower rural folks by providing them with equal opportunity for human development which in turn should boost income and employment generation in rural India.

As more and more villages get connected, an entire economy that has been difficult to tap and grow will have huge opportunities. If agricultural problems and cures can be

disseminated across the country through an email, if health and rainwater harvesting training can be disseminated by video lectures, the physical need for skilled people to travel to every village, every time would be done away with.

Technology will greatly help in bridging the rural urban divide. Villagers could directly find buyers and sellers across the country or globe. This is already happening.

A villager could order anything from the nearby town on the website and local delivery could ensure that his purchase is delivered. All large companies would be able to offer Internet connectivity to their stockists across the country, cutting down on their inventory and improving delivery times.

There is another major development in this area that is going to hasten the process of bridging the rural urban divide.

At a seminar on Rural ICT organized by Rural Marketing Agencies Association of India (RMAAI) recently in association with NASSCOM Foundation, there was a presentation from Reuters, the world renowned News Agency. Reuters is currently involved in an experiment trying to reach rural news through mobile.

They are trying to reach the farmers with SMS-based rural content service, providing localized information on weather, *mandi* rates and agri-related news. Farmers can literally get the information at the press of a button and that too sitting at home! The concept is presently being tested in Maharashtra among selected agri-producing farmers as a free service. Plans are on to extend both the geography and number of agri products.

In India, new cell phone connections are growing at the rate of six million a month, most of it in semi urban and rural areas which are being targeted in a big way by the mobile service providers across the country. Cell phones need very little electricity and can be charged at night in every village using batteries based on solar energy (an experiment already being successfully implemented by ITC for its e-choupal project). For the first time in history, villagers will have instant connectivity, which has tremendous implications for every sector.

Technocrats are already using cellphones as the new architecture for virtual banks. Cellphone banking, which is already happening in countries like Mexico, Phillipines, Kenya and South Africa, is a distinct possibility in rural India, with enormous implications for rural marketers.

There is no end to what we can think is possible and all these will significantly contribute to increasing incomes and prosperity and greater (marketing) opportunities for corporates in Rural India. Technology is certainly going to help change the way Rural Marketing is done in the not so distant future!



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