"The larger part of our business is protected"

Marico's marketing head Sameer Satpathy speaks to Payal Khandelwal on his brands, on innovation and tough times

PROFILE

Amongst all the gloomy talks about the downturn, it is like a whiff of fresh air to hear someone who is excitedly making plans to make the most of the challenging times. Sameer Satpathy, head-marketing, Marico is not at all deterred by the economic slowdown and is geared up to make Marico's "good brands even better."

Satpathy started his career with Berger Paints as a summer trainee. He spent first couple of years in sales and then eventually moved to marketing. "Somewhere I saw myself as a marketer and wanted to spend more time in the marketing side, which led me to take the call that I had to delve deeper where marketing was concerned in a classical FMCG."

He then moved to Marico and started out on Hair & Care. He was behind the launches of brands like Silk & Shine and Parachute Aftershower. "So basically I was handling the youth portfolio and then moved to handling the health portfolio and NPD. We worked on the new extensions of Saffola which you are seeing now. In 2008, I became the head of marketing."

There are challenges facing any marketer in the next few years, how does Satpathy plan to take them head on in terms of Marico's brands? He says, "We are looking at reframing proposition and values. That work started long time back. We have been working on it so that we hit the ground running. Moreover, a lot of consumption in India is subsistence consumption; you need that minimum to survive. You won't stop using a soap or a shampoo because you didn't make money in the stock market. As the consumption is of that order, the larger part of our business is protected."

"There is also a rural story. Rural India has been seeing unprecedented and consistent growth in the last few years. We see an opportunity there. So there are some opportunity segments that are opening up. There is some amount of bearishness in the urban market but it should be made up technically with bullishness in rural markets," he adds.

Satpathy has a key for dealing with the tough tasks ahead and that key is innovation, which is inherent in the way Marico functions. "We have big innovations in pipeline. For example, we have just launched Saffola Zest. We have some other innovations coming up in Parachute Advanse. So there are things happening across the native brands. We are bringing in more and more new products so as to give consumer the value and make them want to buy. Consumers want to keep the money in their pockets and marketers have to entice them. That is what we are doing with all these innovations. Innovation is a critical part of our success and we will do sharper and better innovations next year to succeed."

Marico's Sameer Satpathy politely dismisses the idea that digital media will take over traditional media

The lowdown

2008 Marketing head, Marico

2005 Category head for youth products, Marico

2002 Brand manager for Hair & Care, Marico

1995 Management trainee, Berger Paints

While there are predictions that digital might take over traditional media in tough times, Satpathy dismisses the idea politely. "As far as we are concerned, I don't see a fundamental shift. Yes, there is a bit of new age media and social marketing which is coming to fore but these are still additional media for us and not mainline. So I don't see any disruption in the usage pattern as far as media is concerned."

Nevertheless, there are definitely some changes that he would like to see at Marico soon. "We would want next year to be better than this year in the way we can demonstrate values which the consumers can perceive (communication has to do that) in terms of creating interactivity in some brands and in being first port of call for some brands. We want the consumer to come to us for certain kind of information. Because if he comes there, that means he will stay with us. Those are the kind of areas which we will work more on," he says.

The next change would be to make the positioning of Marico's brands stronger and launching new products. "Brands are built over years. For us, our principal brands are in a certain zone which we think is correct. It's about building the position more strongly and building innovation around that position. In terms of product launches, the pace will go up. It's one way of getting a passive market; to reposition the value, proposition through new innovations to make the consumers spend. We will do more of this."

Over the years one has seen an explosion in large formats stores. What are the opportunities and challenges for a brand like Marico? Explains Satpathy, "Formats are good for us as strong brands usually gain in these formats because availability is longer at play. It is a matter of pure brand strength. If your brand has strength, is stronger than the competition and is available, the probability is very high that the consumer is going to pick you up. Strong brands have disproportionately larger share in modern trade. In a lot of categories you would have that. However, there is some amount of value play by modern day format players. That could be a challenge in the years to come. But it comes down to the same thing, if your brand is strong, then it withstands that. So it's a question of building strong brands."

When asked about his personal goals for the next year, he says, like a true marketer, that it is to build great brands, make a good brand a better brand and build a great team.

CHATTER

"The days of presenting a business model for the future and borrowing money are over."
Ashish Bagga, CEO, India Today

"If a product does not appeal to the consumers emotionally, it will not sell. Any form of seduction is not rational. We are a combination of many things and at the centre of these things are emotions."
Josy Paul, chairman and NCD, BBDO India

"Any brand, which represents integrity, hard work, dedication and is able, to symbolise a 'never say die' attitude would match him (A.R Rahman)."
Prasoon Joshi, executive chairman and regional executive creative director, McCann Erickson Asia Pacific

"Over-reliance on GECs is shifting towards a wider bouquet of channels. Clever planning with wider channels can give incremental reach and better efficiencies."
Sukhpreet Singh, general manager, marketing, Whirlpool India.

"Participation in Cannes is a no-brainer. We'll cut back on delegates, but not at Goafest – our young guns need to learn from the 'been-there-done-thats' and see what competition is doing."
Bobby Pawar, chief creative officer, Mudra Group