

It's the right time to target the farmer

Rural India should remain relatively insulated from the global financial crisis but marketers will have to make the extra effort to get it to spend



Making a point: R. Seshadri says an informal survey showed there haven't been any major cutbacks in rural initiatives so far. Sharp Image

The global economic meltdown certainly has Indian marketers worried. Stories of companies tightening their belts, and its impact on marketing and advertising budgets, are grabbing headlines. The question often being asked is, "How has it impacted the potential in rural India?"

While it's early to hazard an accurate guess, my hunch is that considering the fact that India itself has been relatively less affected by the meltdown due to its primary dependence on domestic consumption rather than exports, rural India would be even more insulated, given that almost 60% of its households are dependent on agriculture, where fortunes fluctuate more on the basis of vagaries of the monsoon than those of the Sensex or Lehman Brothers and AIG! Even the increasing spiral of inflation, with its direct impact on prices of vegetables, would indeed benefit the farmer, fetching him a better price for his produce.

Add to this the sop of an about Rs66,000 crore loan waiver bestowed by our generous finance minister P. Chidambaram

recently and the farmer's family could possibly be heading to the nearest hypermarket to splurge!

What about the remaining 40% of non-farm households? If you were to consider a mix of traders, artisans, blue-collar workers and local service providers such as teachers, doctors and health workers, among others, who constitute a large chunk of this segment, their incomes and spending capacity would, in my opinion, be as insulated as the farmer household from the so-called global meltdown.

Coming back to the question of marketing and advertising spending in rural India, a quick informal survey among some agency members of the Rural Marketing Association of India, or RMAI (of which my agency is a founder member), shows that none of their clients has announced a major cutback in rural initiatives.

Now is the time marketers need to turn their attention even more seriously to that farmer in Punjab, sitting on his *charpoy*, inhaling his *hookah* with a glass of *lassi* in his hand and wads of currency in his pocket.

For a moment, let's ponder over what has been happening to the lifestyle of the average middle-income rural consumer in the last few years of our country's economic resurgence. His hunger for some basic products and services, taken for granted by urbanites, has just started to be satiated.

He wakes up in the morning not to the melodious crowing of his rooster but to the time shown on his latest Sonata watch, brushes his teeth not with *datun* but with his favourite mint toothpaste, dresses up to go to work not in his *dhoti* and *pagdi* but in denim trousers and T-shirt, hops on to his four-stroke motorbike and not the old faithful Hero bicycle, stops along the way for a bottle of Coke rather than the usual *nimbu paani*, picks up his latest Nokia handset to talk to his family rather than visit the local phone booth, comes back home in the evening to switch on his 21 inches colour TV to watch the latest news rather than "listen" to his old radio gathering dust in a corner, and so on and so forth.

All basic stuff for you and me but not for Dhanasekara Reddy in Rayalacheruvu village in Andhra Pradesh. Stuff he is not going to give up in a hurry, global economic meltdown notwithstanding.

But getting Reddy to change his lifestyle calls for much more than those glitzy 30-second TV commercials that we in urban India are so used to. It calls for innovative marketing and direct communication efforts exploring the dusty rural countryside to goad him to take out the wads of currency hiding in his denim trouser pocket. It is these efforts that this column will showcase and review in the weeks to come.

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