

Rural Marketing and Product Promotion: An Analysis of the Project Shakthi by Hindustan Unilever Limited

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ABSTRACT

Background: *Hindustan Unilever Limited is a leading company that manufactures fast-moving consumer goods. HUL's role is vital in meeting the essential product needs of rural consumers essential. HUL was the first company to reach rural consumers and generate demand for mass consumer goods in rural markets. Despite various obstacles in reaching rural customers due to the lack of infrastructure and communication facilities, the company has done a great job of reaching rural consumers. HUL initiated to reach rural customers through various projects and strategies including the Shakthi Project, a great initiative that focused not only on customer satisfaction but also on the empowerment of the rural population, especially women and. Through this project, the company has been able to benefit society through its corporate social responsibility initiatives as well as other programs to protect the environment. In addition to increasing the company's sales, the project also resulted in the rural women becoming independent and self-reliant. Through this project, many women have been encouraged to become self-employed, resulting in improved living standards and financial stability for rural households. Initially, it was a tough task for the company because the effort required to implement the project was comparatively high than that of other projects. It included the cost of training and developing skills in women to market and sell the products. Although the company faced certain hurdles in implementing its innovative project and support activities, the company won the trust of the rural people and began to meet their needs, raise living standards, and also engage in the betterment of society.*

Methodology: *The study is based on data from secondary sources. The main source of information is the company's website, which provides detailed information about its operations and performance since its inception. The other sources of information are magazines, newspapers and also published articles and research papers. SWOT analysis is done based on the data collected.*

Findings: *An analysis of the Shakthi project initiated by HUL highlights the company's diverse involvement in certain significant activities that benefit both society and the rural population. It also highlights the company's various actions and initiatives in CSR activities, creating employment opportunities, empowering women, and self-sufficiency.*

Originality/Value: *This paper highlights the initiation of HUL's Shakthi project, which was adopted to promote mass consumer goods in rural markets, and highlights the benefits of the company's adopted project for the rural population. Certain interpretations, observations, results, and suggestions have been listed based on the data collected with some suggestions.*

Paper Type: *Company Analysis as a Research Case Study.*

Keywords: HUL, Project Shakthi, Rural Consumer, Women Empowerment, Corporate Social Responsibility, SWOT Analysis

1. INTRODUCTION :

Most of the population in India lives in the villages and the population of these villages is widely dispersed. Due to the dispersal of the population, marketers have difficulty reaching rural consumers. There are several reasons like lack of infrastructure, communication facilities, lack of media awareness, etc. that prevent companies from taking the initiative to reach rural markets. Despite these rural marketing obstacles, most companies have made great efforts to reach rural consumers. Among the companies, Hindustan Unilever Limited, which was earlier known as Hindustan Lever Limited, featured prominently as one of the first companies to reach rural consumers and create demand for its products in the FMCG sector [1].

Hindustan Unilever Limited generates half of its business and income from rural areas. Because most of the products of HUL are sold in more than three lakh villages with 3000 to 6000 inhabitants. In the late 1990s, with increasing competition, the company realized the need for strengthening its distribution network in order to increase its market share. HUL identified many other villages, but the challenge was to reach those villages in remote parts of India. Since these villages were sparsely populated, it was difficult to maintain a daily-based distribution network. With millions of potential customers, HLL was unable to reach them due to poor road conditions, transportation, lack of advertising coverage, and lack of a retail distribution network. Additionally, the company started to create awareness on health and hygiene matters in order to attract customers to the products. HLL products were completely new products to most of rural communities. Therefore, the company saw the need for a new type of distribution network. Hindustan Lever found a solution in the form of Project Shakti (meaning strength in Sanskrit). The company decided to merge and work with various self-help groups so that the company could achieve its target without any delay and save the women from the exploitations of the money lenders [2].

Project Shakti started in November 2000 in the Nalgonda district in Andhra Pradesh with 50 SHGs in 50 villages and 1,000 to 2,000 participants. This project was initiated to create a market for the product and also to work towards the betterment of rural regions. This project was a win-win partnership between HLL and rural self-help groups (SHG), which are mainly composed of illiterate women. HUL helped SHGs access microcredit, buy HLL products, and sell them in their villages. This project helped the company in reaching the most remote villages.

HLL executives began by performing at rural self-help organization conferences and explaining the benefits of the project. HLL provided those self-help organisation women with extensive training in income, business expertise, and bookkeeping strategies to assist them in becoming microentrepreneurs. Each girl who wishes to become a shakti distributor must first invest between Rs.10,000 and Rs.15,000. The money was borrowed from SHG organizations or microfinance banks [3].

Each of these providers aims to serve 500 clients who generate a monthly income of Rs 10,000 or more. Since farmers have a seasonal coin income (time after harvest), other halves can generate sustainable income on a monthly basis while boosting their confidence and ability to function around the house. For single or widowed mothers, Shakti project was a benchmark of security. Within 4 years the Shakti project was expanded to 12 states protecting 50,000 villages with 13,000 Shakti vendors and reaching out 70 million, extremely dispersed customers living in remote villages. To make the Shakti project a success, HLL worked with 300 NGOs, banks, and government agencies across the country [4].

2. RELATED WORKS :

The promotional strategy and the project Shakthi initiated by HUL have covered the major part of rural markets and have benefitted several rural households and especially the rural women to be self-employed and self-supporting. The company has not only concentrated on customer satisfaction, sales and increasing revenue but also has performed responsibilities towards the society and increasing the living standards of rural people by creating entrepreneurship opportunities.

Articles from Google Scholar are referred for the purpose of identifying the related research on the title. The articles from the year 2010 to 2021 are reviewed for the purpose of gathering relevant data.

Table 1: Review of HUL and its promotional measures: Project Shakthi

S. No	Area	Issue	Reference
1	Poverty alleviation, employment opportunities	Project Shakthi, SHG - Corporate Partnership	Das, R. (2021). [5]
2	Marketing strategies of Hindustan Unilever Limited	Best strategies adopted	Raj,K. & Aithal, P. S. (2018). [6]
3	Marketing strategies of Hindustan Unilever Limited	Marketing strategy	Suganthi, V. (2016). [7]
4	Corporate Social Responsibility of HUL	CSR- Sustainable	Singh, M. K., & Sharma, S. (2015). [8]
5	Sustainable Marketing	Sustainable marketing and product promotion	Jeevan, P. (2016). [9]
6	Marketing strategies and HUL	Marketing Strategies	Kaur, M., (2013). [10]
7	Motivation, Micro-entrepreneurship	Project Shakthi and micro-entrepreneurship ideas	Baral, S. K., (2012). [11]
8	Innovations, Strategies	Innovations in rural marketing	Thomas, A.E.& Asha, E. (2013). [12]
9	Strategies, selling products, and impact on rural consumer	Rural marketing, product selling, problems and challenges	Ahmed, A. (2013). [13]
10	Benefits, Initiatives, rewards	Project Shakthi, Rural Consumer Welfare	Lahiri, I., & Majumder, I. (2011). [14]

The table gives a brief analysis of the information relating to the strategies adopted by HUL in marketing its products with the main focus on Project Shakthi.

3. OBJECTIVES :

- (1) To examine Project Shakthi and understand its initiatives
- (2) To assess the challenges faced by the company in implementing the Project
- (3) To evaluate Project Shakthi through SWOT analysis.
- (4) To assess the social and economic contribution of Project Shakthi

4. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY :

Hindustan Unilever Limited is a prominent company in the production of Fast-Moving Consumer Goods. With the introduction of a variety of FMC products, the company stands in a leading position in the present scenario. HUL was the first company that reached rural consumers despite the hurdles of infrastructure lacking. Through its various promotional strategies and projects, HUL has covered most of the rural markets. Among these projects, Shakthi plays an outstanding role in achieving the company's objective of reaching rural customers. Through this project, the rural households have gained self-reliance and economic living along with entrepreneurship opportunities. Consumers of rural areas are confident with the HUL brands and prefer the products of this company. Along with the promotional measures, HUL is creating awareness relating to various issues concerning the rural people and is implementing its CSR activities in these rural regions. The study is conducted to examine and understand Project Shakthi and also to know the challenges and strategies used by the company to implement the project. The study also focuses on assessing the overall performance and the benefits of the Project to the rural households and the company.

5. METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY :

The data for the study is from secondary sources. Research papers and articles relevant to the study of Project Shakthi were referred through Google scholar, Research Gate, and academia websites. Magazines and Newspaper articles on the company and the official website of the company were referred for the base information. After analysing the data gathered the interpretation has been noted.

6. PROJECT SHAKTHI AND ITS INITIATIVES :

HUL introduced Project Shakti in 2001 with the goal of empowering rural women from disadvantaged backgrounds. Small communities with a population of no more than 2000 were the focus of this program. Self-Help Groups (SHGs) were the structure under which Shakti operated, and its main goal was to raise living standards in rural India. This project gave rural women the tools and training they needed to work as an extension of the business, which enabled the women to provide their families with much-needed additional money.

Over 120,000 women in rural India have received funding from the outstanding Shakti program. Providing women with a chance for self-employment, it has raised the average income of a Shakti household and improved their quality of life and status in their communities. The purpose of "Project Shakti" is to give women micro-entrepreneurs in rural India a chance to improve their standard of living. These female business owners, known as Shakti Ammas, are instructed in the fundamentals of distribution management and made familiar with the company's products in an effort to give a steady income. Shakti Ammas receive training and assistance to launch their own micro-businesses selling Unilever goods in rural areas with low incomes. Economic empowerment, improved social standing inside the family, and enhanced social standing within the village are the three objectives of the program for Shakti Ammas.

Three pillars serve as the foundation for HUL's sustainable living strategy: strengthening livelihoods, lowering environmental impact, and enhancing health and well-being. The sustainable living program is compatible with Project Shakti. It seeks to increase women's level of financial independence by doing so, which will benefit their households and the local community's financial health. Unilever items are made available by hiring Shakti Ammas to distribute them in the local villages [15]. Under Project Shakti there are three main initiatives that are discussed below:

6.1 Shakti Entrepreneur

An SHG woman chosen as Shakti and HLL entrepreneur will deliver the goods to the women's Shakti homes with a margin of 3% higher than what is typically offered to regular traders. Due to the SHGs' ability to sell to shops as well, their overall sales were greatly increased, and their adherence to the program was ensured. Shakti women were advised to concentrate on locales with a limited shop infrastructure. The rural distributor sent the inventories instead of the C and A agents (cash and forwarding) (RD). Small orders from Shakti dealers allowed RD to handle them with ease. There is no other middleman in the system, and payment is paid in cash upon delivery of the items.

6.2 I-Shakti

HLL started the i-Shakti project in 2003. This project was started to meet the villagers' information needs and offer communication-based organizations access to areas of the country that are not served by mass media. To do this, community "kiosks" composed mostly of connected residences of Shakti business owners were established. The state government of Andhra Pradesh supported i-official Shakti's debut in November 2004. Through this project, villagers were able to obtain free information on various topics, including farming and gardening, personal hygiene and health, money management, children's and adults' education, employment, and leisure.

6.3 Shakti Vani

HLL launched a new endeavour to better the lives and means of subsistence of the people of India as a continuation of the Shakti project. The Shakti Vani Project, which translates to "strength in speech," is an initiative to disseminate information on the best and most appropriate health and hygiene practises, including disease prevention, prenatal and postnatal care, etc. HLL officials hired local women and instructed them in cleanliness and health matters. Meetings to raise awareness in schools and other public gatherings were organised, and communication tools including visual literature were used [16].

7. SWOT ANALYSIS OF PROJECT SHAKTHI :

Project Shakti from HUL is a unique and imaginative strategy that benefits both the company and society. The corporation launches this project in an effort to expand the market for its goods in rural areas, which ultimately led to the company taking on corporate responsibility. The project's strengths,

weaknesses, opportunities, and threats are shown in an analysis of the project [17]-[24].

Table 2: Based on the reviewed articles, the table indicates the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats of HUL Company

<p><u>Strengths</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stands in the first position in FMCG • High demand for products • Different categories of products • Revenue generation is high • Most of the rural areas are covered • Brand Image already exists 	<p><u>Opportunities</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reaching the remote rural areas through collaboration with Organisations • Gaining the confidence of the customers by reaching the assumed impossible regions through possible ways • Creating more marketing segments along with the existing ones • Marketing the products along with highlighting the social responsibility
<p><u>Weakness</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More efforts are required to reach the unreached areas • Promotional measures are to be increased in the present-day scenario 	<p><u>Threats</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Entry of competitors in the same field • Due to the introduction of herbal products the company's sales may be affected • Innovative ideas are more necessary than that of the competitor

8. CHALLENGES FACED BY THE COMPANY :

Project Shakthi was an initiative that would result in a win-win situation. Despite the company's unique and effective plans and concepts at the time, there were bound to be some challenges when the project was put into action. This is due to the rural regions' adherence to traditions and conventions and the low literacy rate. The challenges faced by the company are discussed below.

- Due to the project's rapidly developing state, the HUL team had to come up with a solution to increase the number of entrepreneurs without substantially expanding the number of managers because of the development and popularity of the project.
- The Shakthi entrepreneurs were impacted by the varying levels of affluence in different states, which led to difficulty in selling the products. As a result, the company had to face the challenges of managing the entrepreneurs so that every customer could be reached.
- Implementing the project had many challenges in reaching the entrepreneurs due to a lack of infrastructure facilities.
- Due to the practice maintained in the villages, it was sometimes almost impossible for a woman to leave her home and try to sell things to male villagers or to neighbouring homes.
- A rural sales promoter found it challenging to operate efficiently across the state due to the stark variances in dialects spoken in surrounding districts.
- The Shakthi entrepreneurs had to cope with the difficulty of encouraging self-confidence and initiative in disadvantaged, scarcely literate women in order to keep them from becoming demoralised after receiving a few early rejections.
- As the performance of Shakthi ammas was decreasing in few of the villages, the company realised that the Shakti entrepreneurs needed a rigorous training programme.
- Finding brand managers to support the Project was another obstacle the company had to overcome. They had to persuade the brand managers to pay for a large portion of Shakti's advertising and brand-building expenses.
- In addition, women-owned unsold items worth thousands of rupees were heaped up in their homes. These women also had to repay the loan they had used to purchase these stocks. Women who had never engaged in independent economic endeavours regretted choosing to become Shakti entrepreneurs
- Due to government limitations and lockdowns during the pandemic, the company had difficulty supplying the products to the Shakthi ammas. However, the business was able to contact them through a variety of channels, particularly through telephone orders, and ensure that the clients received the goods.

Project Shakthi has not only contributed to rural development but also to the mutual benefit of both the company and the rural people, especially women.

Since business is the main motive in addition to contributing to CSR, great differences can be made in the marketing of the product. This innovative and creative strategy of the Shakthi project initiated by HUL has made a big difference in rural minds and has also benefited the company.

9.1 Social Value of the Project

HUL introduced Low Unit Price (LUP) packages in order to see that the products are easily bought by rural people. With the intention of raising the standard of living of people in rural India, HULs team has made selfless efforts. It has led to an almost 50% increase in the moving income of rural households. Through the other extension programs of the project, Shakthi like Shakthi Vani, I-Shakthi, etc. the rural people are given awareness relating to health and hygiene, and also various other information on agriculture and other aspects were given at their doorsteps [26].

10. FINDINGS AND SUGGESTIONS :

Despite numerous attempts to access the rural market, Hindustan Unilever could not reach most of the villages. Due to the severe lack of basic infrastructure facilities in these areas, it has been unable to reach those isolated settlements. There are no adequate telecommunications, energy, or transportation connections. It would be really appreciated if HUL could take the initiative of social responsibility towards these remote locations and make it feasible to reach these people since it was the first corporation to carry on the rural business. The business must identify these areas in collaboration with the government and other social organizations. While HUL has made every effort to ensure its customers' happiness, the company also has numerous opportunities to reach the underserved rural population. The threat of new entrants won't materialize if the company takes the lead because it now holds the top spot in the FMCG category.

11. CONCLUSION :

Shakthi, an initiative by HUL, has benefited the corporation, the rural population, and the customers all around. In addition to helping improve the livelihood of rural residents, particularly women and their households, it has also benefited the company to a greater extent. The project's launch was a commercial initiative with positive social effects, and HUL used it as part of an impressive marketing plan to connect with rural consumers. Villages' sustainable development has benefited from the project. The ripple effect technique of household development is used to promote women's empowerment in the initiative. A business that benefits both the corporation and the customer's quality of life is Project Shakthi, which served as a compelling example. The company has worked hard to earn the rural population's trust, and it has done its utmost to uphold that trust. A business that benefits the corporation while also enhancing the quality of life for its customers is Project Shakthi. By making the best possible contributions through Project Shakthi, HUL has prioritized social responsibility in addition to corporate growth. The organization has today won the trust of the rural population, and it has done its best to meet their FMCG needs.

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