

Plastic Passion

How are corporates dealing with the increasing backlash against plastic and the expectations that they play a larger role in cleanup? And how does this affect how these brands are perceived. **By Delshad Irani & Amit Bapna**

When travelers traipsing about the Indian countryside, especially at higher altitudes, stop for a snack at a dhaba, Maggi noodles is always a top choice. It's an association so strong that even Nestle's popular instant noodle brand created a commercial with snowy mountains in the background, weary tourists bundled in sweaters served Maggi by friendly locals. It's a mouth-watering sight. Until, of course, every strand of Maggi is consumed and the city-slickers return home.

Last year, India's largest trekking community, Indiahikes conducted its first-ever Himalayan Waste Audit, as part of its long running efforts to clean up popular trekking destinations. For the past few years, the organization has been providing all members with an Eco Bag, which can be easily buckled around the waist, so trek-

kers can pick up litter along the way. The audit headed by avid trekker and environmentalist Ori Gutin was the latest of these efforts and the first that puts manufacturers at the center of the mess. It covered two of the most popular Himalayan treks, Roopkund and Hampta Pass, which are 765 kilometers apart, and in two different states. The results weren't shocking if you consider our love for Maggi in the mountains.

13 companies, including Parle, Mondelez, Perfetti, Britannia, Mars, PepsiCo and Haldirams, among oth-

PARLE, MONDELEZ, PERFETTI, BRITANNIA, MARS, PEPSICO, HALDIRAM ETC ACCOUNTED FOR 77.5% OF WASTE IN TWO HIMALAYAN TREKS. 20.2% WAS FROM NESTLE ALONE

ers, accounted for 77.5% of the total waste collected. But 20.2% of all waste collected from both locations was from Nestle, "meaning that nearly 1 out of every 5 pieces of identifiable trash in the Himalayas is from Nestle", as per the report. At No 2 is Parle, contributing 10.8% of waste. The report concludes: "Companies have no control over how consumers use their products. It is not the fault of Nestle, Parle, Mondelez International (makers of Cadbury) or any other company that their products are ending up as litter in the most beautiful mountain range in the world, slowly killing wildlife and vegetation, damaging waterways, and polluting the atmosphere when burned. However, that does not mean they cannot do something about it."

So what can they do? The final re-

port lists some measures: Develop waste management systems in rural Himalayan villages. Facilitate programs to educate locals not to litter. Hire mule drivers to collect waste from shops out in the middle of the mountain treks. Hire people to remove the mass amounts of waste already strewn about the Himalayas. However, these companies, despite immense resources at their disposal, haven't exactly stepped up to do any of the above, the report concludes.

When **Brand Equity** spoke to Lakshmi Selvakumar, who heads the Green Trails Initiative at IndiaHikes, she told us one of the easier on-ground solutions is to encourage hungry trekkers and travellers to go for, say, egg bhurjee over Maggi. Eventually, one supposes, dhaba owners will have no reason to keep Maggi on the menu.

As people across the state of Maharashtra scrambled to secure and protect their cloth bags following the plastic bag ban, another notification by the state government could bring major FMCG companies under the Extended Producers Responsibility (EPR) model. In short, companies have to clean up after their consumers. This is what Nestle said in an email response to a query sent by BE: "Nestlé India shares the ambition that no plastic waste should end up discarded in the environment and believe that with the right approach it can be collected or recycled without a detrimental impact." One of the approaches includes street plays. Nestle is collaborating with industry bodies and organisations like Indian Pollution Control Association (IPCA), NEPRA and Saahas Waste Management to conduct education and awareness programmes, workshops and street plays for waste pickers, waste dealers, traders and aggregator communities.

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The country's biggest FMCG company HUL had this to say; "We completely support the government initiative of significantly improving the state of plastic waste management in the country... At HUL, we have reduced one-third of our plastic packaging since 2010. Further, we are committed to using packaging which will be reusable, recyclable or compostable by 2025." ITC's solid waste management initiatives today extend

to 10 states across the country, covering cities, towns, villages and even temples. Areas around religious sites often bear the brunt of environmental abuse at the hands of humans and religious events/festivals are known to leave in their wake a severely damaged ecosystem.

For now though, optimizing packaging design and packaging weight reduction are the key areas of focus for manufacturers. Says a Mondelez India spokesperson, "design simplification has been undertaken over the years to make our packaging single layer foil from three layer packaging."

PepsiCo India is also reducing the quantity of plastic. According to a company spokesperson, it has re-sized packaging for snacks master brands Lay's and Kurkure. Pepsi is working with partners to develop sustainable, environmentally friendly packaging solutions and will pilot its first-ever 100% compostable, plant-based packaging for Lay's and Kurkure in the fourth quarter of 2018.

Savvy marketers have long used environmental planks to bolster their brands' green credentials. However, national and state level legislations are quickly putting plastic waste management and reduction out of their reach. Says Ravi Agrawal, director, Toxics Link, "Many companies bring out a sustainability

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report. It's something they can do voluntarily. But if it becomes a regulatory requirement then it's no longer about doing good. It goes out of the ambit of 'oh, I'm doing so many good things so why should I do this?' It has a much more serious implication because it's not voluntary. You need to set up the systems, redesign, rethink etc. It hits at the very heart of the product you sell."

People like Selvakumaran think it's about time companies clean up after their consumers and she's keen to see what effect this will have on-ground. A 2017 post by Gutin asked in the headline 'Maggi or the Mountains, What Will You Choose?' The answer is not a 2-minute one. However, in the meantime, might we suggest an Eco Bag for every employee this Diwali?

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