

HUL, Jio team up for a branded play

A slowing economy pushes the two to come together to develop a joint engagement platform for rural consumers

VIVEAT SUSAN PINTO
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The country's youngest and largest telecom operator, Jio, is locking its step with one of the oldest and largest consumer goods multinationals in the country, Hindustan Unilever (HUL); the two have teamed up to keep their portfolio of brands relevant and their customers, engaged, amidst a slowdown in consumption expenditure.

Telecom operators including Reliance Jio have had to face down a slew of tough challenges as has HUL, as rural spending has shrunk over the past few months. This has led the two to devise a strategy that lets them share appreciation and goodwill over a social initiative.

The two say they are working to a higher cause, that of upskilling rural women. By doing this, the two hope to establish their long term commitment towards the community, while casting a halo around their brands that could hold them in good stead through the ongoing crisis.

Mohit Kapoor, vice president, advertising and business alliances, Reliance Jio, says that engagement-led advertising is the way forward for brands tapping digital. "And if they (brands) can tie purpose to their digital engagement (with customers), then their campaigns will be effective," he says.

A recent report by market research agency Nielsen had said that growth for rural fast moving consumer goods (FMCG) was the lowest in six quarters, between October and



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December 2019, for India. The market, it said, would recover slowly over time. From growing 1.4 times that of urban markets earlier, rural growth, industry experts and FMCG executives said was down to 0.5 times urban markets between October and December 2019.

While HUL has said that Wheel has maintained its momentum in rural areas, growing 1.3 times that of the market in the December quarter, experts say that the company and its

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PRABHA NARASIMHAN
 Executive Director, Homecare, HUL

brands are not immune to trends and weak consumer sentiment. This has led the company to team up with Jio.

For Jio, Wheel helps take its digital offering into the large community of HUL consumers. Wheel reaches over 160 million households in India, mostly in rural areas and low-income families and Jio has the largest subscriber base in India at nearly 365 million, a sizeable number of which is in rural areas. By joining hands in an upskilling initiative,

the two are stitching up a long-term, purposeful and tangible association in the minds of consumers say experts.

Prabha Narasimhan, executive director (homecare), HUL, says, "We started our purpose-led journey with Wheel in 2018 with 'Pehno Fresh, Socho Fresh'. (Wear fresh, think fresh) The current initiative is a confluence of digital technology and women's empowerment. The idea being that a woman can contribute financially to her family's progress, if she's given the skills to do so," she says.

Aware of the challenges faced by women in rural areas, the two are providing online lessons in three areas: financial literacy, vocational training (including sewing and beautician courses) and spoken English. Content for the modules has been provided by HUL in 63 easily downloadable videos.

"It all starts with a simple exercise of purchasing a one kg pack of Wheel," says Nitish Bhalotia, GM, Fabric Care (Core), HUL. "Upon purchase, women keen on upskilling themselves and who have access to Jio phones, will get 1 GB of 4G data free for the videos," he says. The online tutorials are divided into four parts or modules of 15-16 videos each are easy to understand, engaging and accommodate the daily schedules and challenges of rural living, the companies said. Since the programme kicked off in November 2019, 6.7 lakh women have enrolled and downloaded 1 GB of data, Bhalotia says. Of this, 1.5 lakh women are on their way to completing at least one module and 41,000 women have received certificates of completion so far for the modules they've done.

Narasimhan says that the programme will continue for a few months before a call is taken on extending it and involving more telecom operators. "The response to this initiative has been good and gives us hope that if the right skills are imparted to women, it can go a long way in empowering them," she says.