



The Real Masked Heroes

Members of HUL's Brand Protection Unit believe their jobs are more than just about protecting the brand. By **Delshad Irani**

In February this year, Hindustan Unilever filed a Notice of Motion suit in the Bombay High Court which alleged fake versions of two of its popular brands Ponds face cream and Lakme eye-liner were being sold in the market. A private security firm was activated to investigate and rigorous testing of products at labs followed. Then last week, according to reports, Mumbai Police arrested seven people for selling these fake goods.

This is standard operating procedure for one the country's biggest companies in its battle against counterfeits.

Over the past few years, HUL has been particularly active in building and growing a network that comprises its own people from special units to on-ground sales teams, various law enforcement and official agencies, courts and informed consumers to check the counterfeit industry and raise awareness about Intellectual Property Rights, trademarks and identifying fakes.

Which, let's face it, we all need a crash course in. Dev Bajpai, executive director, legal and corporate affairs, HUL, admits, "I didn't know anything about IPR until I joined law-college."

Unfair competition, a polite term for counterfeiters, has been and is a "huge problem" says Bajpai. It hurts not just brands and bottom-lines,

but in categories like food, pharma, personal care, cosmetics and baby products, fake goods sold under trusted labels can have "disastrous consequences". As Justice Kathawalla who passed the above order noted, "The goods in question

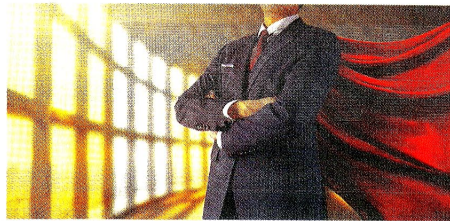
are meant to be applied on skin and eyelids.

If the defendants are allowed to continue with their infringing activities any further, the same may lead to disastrous consequences. In the interest of member of the public who purchase these products thinking that the same are original products, stern action is required to be taken against such defendants."

>Continued on Page 4

**COUNTER-
FEITING
HURTS
BRANDS
AND BOT-
TOM-LINES**

The Real...



Naturally then the people who fight counterfeiters on a daily basis consider it a service to society.

When Brand Equity requested interviews with members of HUL's Brand Protection Unit, we were told that the company takes the utmost care to protect these individuals' identities because they often deal with unpleasant and even dangerous elements of society.

A former Indian Air Force Flight Lieutenant who joined the unit a few years ago tells us, "In defense we served society and here also I believe we are serving society." The fight is on two fronts, he informs us. There's the foreign fake goods arriving through various ports and then there's a strong domestic counterfeit industry. One of the most successful programs thus far has been IPR awareness and training sessions

with Indian Customs officials. "We have to closely work with Customs and communication channels always have to be open because if we don't do that Customs is not liable to hold the goods." He adds, "Our intention is that every person in Customs knows about IPR. When it comes to import of counterfeit goods we can't do anything without Customs. We need to be there for them. If they have doubts they must know we are there to address that. When they call we go. They give us the products, we check them at our labs, confirm whether they are fake or original

and send the report back and then proceed as per the rules."

Similarly, seminars in schools and colleges on IPR and patent laws, how to spot fakes, etc have also increased in frequency. "It's not just for the benefit of HUL that we catch and confiscate counterfeit goods.

We are imparting knowledge on the importance of IPR among kids, female students who are most affected by bad cosmetics.

We teach them exactly what we teach Customs officials." After all, they are, as he puts it, "the consumers of tomorrow". Aware consumers also make great lead generators. For instance, a few days after holding one such session in Bengaluru the company re-

WHEN IT COMES TO IMPORT OF COUNTERFEIT GOODS WE CAN'T DO ANYTHING WITHOUT CUSTOMS

ceived leads which helped foil several counterfeiting operations.

Considering the scale and size of the counterfeit goods industry, these might seem

to us mere drops in a vast and rough ocean. But members of HUL's Brand Protection Unit don't see it that way. "Our job is to carry on and go after counterfeiters. We feel happy every time we catch them." So far the company's strategy that involves everyone from Customs to consumers to even competition has been working well. In their world, there's no such thing as my or your lead, the flight lieutenant tells us; "It's a bigger fight. We have to share leads. Counterfeiters also have networks so we have to out-smart each other."

delshad.irani@timesgroup.com