

COVER STORY

FOLLOW THE CONSUMER

Consumer centricity continues to be a key theme for HUL, and in the foods category, **Geetu Verma, Executive Director, Foods**, has made this pivotal to identifying future growth areas

HUL devised a strategy to revive its foods category sometime ago. This led to the growth of the category's contribution to the company's overall revenue. Last year, in line with global changes, the company divided foods and refreshments into two separate categories. The change meant further focus on understanding consumer's changing tastes and preferences.

Two very clear things have transpired — first, the categories in which HUL operates in, whether it is ketchup or soups, have inflected. The consumption has grown significantly, for example, on ketchup, the penetration has grown from mid-teens to over 20 per cent and continues to grow. Second, the category definition has expanded with variants rising. "It is not just ketchup anymore. This entire area of playing with food with fun dressings and sauces is constantly rising. As the depth and repertoire increases, it will continue to be an area of focus for us," explains Geetu Verma, Executive Director, Foods, HUL.

As a category, soups is not yet as big but it has increasingly become more relevant and is a convenient substitute for less healthy snacks. While these are some of HUL's core areas, there are two emerging spaces of interest to the company. "The first is of mini-meals and snacking. Much is happening there. And the second space is around healthier eating," Verma informs.

Identifying Consumer Trends

There are several trends that HUL has been picking up in the category, especially in context of Winning In Many Indias (WiMi), but there are three key ones. "The most obvious is what we call 'food adventurism'. People in India are trying different cuisines and cross exploring flavours — experimenting with *achari tikka* in South India for instance, or people in the North trying *rasam*. Equally there is food adventurism of bringing the outside in. By that I mean, exploring international flavours. Some of this is evident if you look at social posting today. People are

talking about matcha tea, wasabi, sriracha, peri peri, quinoa, that were not part of food lingo and repertoire a short while ago," Verma says.

While on the one hand, there is discovery of new cuisines and flavours, on the other hand, there is growing awareness of fitness, health and feeling good inside-out. The third trend is around 'Chefmanship'. Simply explained — everyone today is a chef.

"We are seeing these trends across markets. In fact, recently in Lucknow, I saw pasta selling really well in the wholesale

markets. More interestingly, people there knew exactly that this was pasta, differentiated from macaroni, and to be used with a pasta sauce. The awareness level has percolated beyond metros to the next rung of cities too," she explains.

Building The Food Culture

The HUL Foods leadership team invests in imbibing the

“KEEPING AN EAR TO THE GROUND
Data, analytics and listening to consumers and the industry gives us very rich insights. But eventually, it is up to marketers to join the dots. Consumers will speak on things that are important for them but it is for us to see what the conversation is, what categories are increasingly relevant and the kind of solution that we can bring in the spaces that line up with our strategy and plans. I would say, wait and watch this space. But we will not be responding to a trend for trend's sake. What we will keep in mind is that even when we do something new, it would be something that serves a real need gap, can become part of everyday life and can be scaled up.”



In line with advertising with a message, Kissan's roti roll ads look to make kids' lunch box interesting



food culture. The team meets every month, where it engages in cook offs or similar immersions. "Once, for instance, we went as a team to Hotel Sea Princess and Chef Jerson Monterey Jack took us through an incredible gastronomic journey with full theatrical effect. This gave the team relevant insights on Chefmanship and what inspires food lovers," Verma recalls.

The team also went to a tea plantation in Coonoor. It periodically invites experts from the industry to share all that's happening in the category from different perspectives.

HUL works closely with partner teams in Google, Facebook and Instagram to develop deeper insights on food trends. "There is also much that we learn from HUL's People Data Centre (PDC). PDC is an incredible place to watch out for trends from social listening. Not only do we pick up insights around major events like festivals but also nuances around every day moments of consumption," Verma explains.

Growth Forward

Growing penetration is a leading theme for the category. The two drivers to this are mak-

Applying USLP in Foods

One of the most tangible examples is how HUL sources ingredients for its food products. By 2020, the company's objective is to source 100 per cent of its agricultural raw materials sustainably. HUL is also doing a lot in promoting nutritious cooking, enabling consumers to cook healthier. It has recently been recognised by ATNI (Access to Nutrition Index) as part of the India spotlight Index, where it ranked No. 2 on both corporate as well as product profile. One of the criteria was the work it is doing in the area of Responsible Marketing. ATNI took into consideration that HUL pledged to not market to children below 12 if the food product does not meet the Unilever nutrition criteria.

With respect to declaring nutrition information on its products, in addition to the mandatory five nutrients of energy, carbohydrate, sugars, fat and protein, HUL brands also declare dietary fibre, saturated fat, trans fat and sodium levels and hence, provide information on nine nutrients with the objective for consumers to make informed choices.



100% of tomatoes used in Kissan ketchup are procured from sustainable sources

ing products relevant in day-to-day consumption and the approach in creating innovative trial experiences.

"In the first, we will address questions like what will be the next phase of the Kissan *roti* roll, for instance. We are doing some interesting things in sampling as well. Also, at present, the penetration in our products is very town centric and the gap with lower-tier cities is significant. We have to work on the right price and product formats to bridge this gap," says Verma. **BW**

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