

Sanal Kumar Velayudhan, *Rural Marketing—Targeting the Non-Urban Consumer*, New Delhi: Response Books, 2007, 249 pp.

The evolving diversity and the emerging challenges encountered by a marketer in the process of offering products and services to the rural clientele are aptly deliberated in this volume. It is built on the rural marketing framework developed in the first edition of the book which focused on the issues relevant to rural marketing, understanding consumer behaviour (in rural markets), institutions for retailers and the managerial options available to the marketer. It delved into the various marketing methods/options available in the basket of choice. Justification for rural marketing based on behavioural variation rather than locational variation is an important construct which smoothened further deliberations. The conceptualisation and decision options reflect the changes in the socio-economic and technological spheres of rural markets and how these changes can be integrated as a response mechanism in the marketing approach.

The opportunities and challenges encompassing rural markets and rural marketing led us to believe that exploiting the same would necessitate adoption of a separate approach which is a significant departure from the conventional wisdom of urban product and urban marketing. With changing profiles of the rural buyer one cannot afford to have an indiscriminate approach to target rural and urban markets. Even within the rural setting there is a need to adopt a segmentation approach which is based on the differentiation strategy. The statistical data signify that there is a huge untapped market in rural areas which is why it makes sense to adopt a systematic approach to target this market.

The author emphasised the importance of understanding the behavioural dimensions of the rural consumer, as it helps in customising the product/service offers to suit their changing requirements. Moreover, manifest behavioural aspects need to be studied in the context of rural consumers' socio-economic environment, cultural practices, variations in life style, etc. Behavioural variations that are unique to rural markets are influenced by the place of purchase, occupation and at times, get reflected in creative use of products. The marketer has to be careful in designing products and developing messages for the rural market. A 'value for money' proposition is definitely a better option than the 'frill' proposition. This reinstates the existing knowledge base that the rural consumer is more concerned about the utilitarian value than the ambience value. This 'value for money' proposition has an important bearing on the pricing strategy, as the author justifies that the rural consumers look for value and not just the price of the product. One can draw a parallel with the Hindustan Petroleum Company Limited's (HPCL) 'community kitchen' concept where the local rural community members received hands-on experience of using LPG gas and understood the value for money factor. The concept of absolute pricing has added a new dimension in the pricing philosophy. Going by this doctrine the author emphasised that it makes sense to decrease the volume rather than increasing the price. A landless labourer, daily wage earner buys his/her provisions daily and therefore, likes pack size which are small, affordable and handy. The decision variables like product features and price determines the 'net value' for the rural consumer.

Developing a sound rural marketing strategy would require understanding the rural market and the rural consumer 'as they are'. The chapter on *Researching Rural Markets* is very relevant as the prevalent knowledge base of the rural market is not as comprehensive as the urban market. Moreover, adopting an urban frame of reference to understand the rural mindset is counter-productive and unwarranted. The research tool which adopts a rural frame of reference is certainly more valuable in the present context. Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) is a technique wherein the scopes for a given research objective are developed by the consumers themselves as are the measures for understanding behaviour.

Communicating the benefits of products/services in an effective and efficient manner is an important factor which can determine the prospect of marketing. In the context of rural markets the job is doubly difficult

because of the spread and heterogeneity of rural markets, cultural and language diversity, non-availability/affordability of conventional media and other exogenous factors. Therefore, chapters on communication are apt in the contexts of rural consumer and rural markets. Communicating the product attributes in the language that the rural consumer comprehends is a challenge that the marketer has to face. Variations in the complexity of the language influence the effectiveness of the message and have a bearing on the consumers' receptivity to the promotion. I think the use of a 'process perspective of communication' to understand communication strategies in rural areas is realistic thinking. The communication strategy has to have the built-in flexibility and autonomy to adapt to the changing local situations.

The issue of reaching out to rural consumers has always remained a daunting task due to geographical spread, low population density, inaccessibility (poor roads, infrastructure facilities, etc.). The author's stand on the traditional multilevel channel for not being too effective in reaching the rural interior signifies the relevance of adopting an alternative approach to reach out to rural masses. Mobile kiosks, partnering with local institutions and developing a symbiotic relationship with existing players are some of the approaches which find merit in the discussion on reaching out to the rural markets. One cannot ignore the importance of *haats* and *melas*, as these are the nerve centres of local business activities which provide the marketer with opportunities to access rural market in a most cost-effective manner. The analysis corroborates the study on *haats* and *melas* carried out by MART, a rural consultancy organisation based in New Delhi. Use of ICT for supplying information, services and obtaining product orders is equally important. Here, examples of ITC's e-choupal, TARAhaat are quite relevant.

The concluding discussion in this book is devoted to a prudent analysis of the competitive strategic options for the rural marketer. The strategic options are examined under a competitive situation in a growing market. Competition from unorganised sectors, duplicates and imitation products are difficult to bypass. Various permutations of the three 'C' factors: consumers, channels and competition make us think of options which are amenable to change. To add to the complexity is the widespread rural market. However, for an enterprising marketer there are combinations waiting to be exploited. The perseverant brand with flexibility in approach and

hold on the channel is there to sustain loyalty and market share. The canvas is ripe to support innovation and creativity, and an enterprising rural marketer cannot ask for more.

The book shows the capability of using a reader friendly style of communication and construction of argument. It presents an able combination of theoretical and practical insights which are useful for understanding the complexity of rural marketing. It is an important addition to the existing literature on rural marketing. This is useful for management students specialising in rural marketing, companies which have started focusing on the 'bottom of the pyramid' market and also for professionals and decision makers who want to leverage their understanding with practical insights. Lastly, for a practitioner, this volume has much relevance as the 'Decision Implications' presented at the end of each chapter provide some sort of a road map for implementation/action.