Chapter 9
Communicating in Media Dark Areas

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ABSTRACT

Companies have to communicate with their consumers and deliver value. This is achievable in areas where consumers are educated and have access to media – and these conditions exist in markets in the developed world and also in urban areas in developing countries. But communicating to distant, scattered villages, or areas where the majority of the population is poor—areas called media-dark—poses a great challenge for business. Further, the target audience may also have no access to education or media. Communicating in these markets physically is simply not economical or feasible. This chapter describes the challenges of reaching consumers in media dark environments. It explores how companies are getting over these obstacles. Drawing on case studies describing innovative use of communication methods, it explains how initiatives can succeed in BOP areas using innovative approaches. A media communication mix is proposed for successfully reaching out to consumers in BOP markets.

INTRODUCTION

This paper stems from a deep concern for people who are ignored by policy makers, who are either too distant or too poor to be included in the development process. Policies of the government and marketing strategies formulated by companies usually focus on the rich, educated and accessible customers. A change in approach is required to reach the 50% or so of the world's population ignored by the development process – people living on less than $2.50 a day. This paper tries to solve the riddle of communicating with such customers in media dark environments and suggests ways of devising strategies to reach them and involve them in the mainstream.

The idea that companies should serve consumers in the neglected bottom-of-the-pyramid (BOP) markets was popularised by Prahalad (2004). Given that urban markets and those in the developed world were saturated, the idea was that companies could serve the often neglected consumers in BOP markets and thereby make a fortune out of it. But companies wishing to tap such markets faced enormous challenges. The problem of establishing supply chains to small, remote markets has been mentioned by many writers. But perhaps an equally big challenge is to find ways to communicate with people in such areas which usually media-dark.

The problems of communicating with customers in media-dark areas are illustrated by the experience of Dr Muhammad Yunus, who pioneered the concepts of 'microcredit' and 'microfinance' in Bangladesh. When he started out with his idea of giving micro loans to people who were living in extreme poverty, he found that he could not communicate with the intended beneficiaries – the women in BOP households. He describes in his book, *Banker to the Poor* (2007), how he could get people to participate in the banking system he wanted to create, a system based on mutual trust, strict supervision, accountability, participation, and creativity, instead of collaterals and guarantees which the poor could not provide.

BEYOND TRADITIONAL THINKING

But how could he explain the concept to women and organising them in groups in a highly traditional society? There was no media that was accessed by such women, who lived in strict traditional social norms and habits. One of the first problems that Dr Yunus faced was talking to women in a society where males were not allowed to interact with them. But talking was the only option, since written messages could not be sent or read, no advertisements were possible and no media existed. For a manager working in developed markets, such problems would well be un-imaginable.

Dr Yunus writes in his book that it was a long and patient process, "Because of the rules of *purdah*, we never dared enter women's houses in the villages we visited. So when I went to meet village women, I never knocked on their doors. Instead, I would stand in a clearing between several houses, so that everyone could see me and observe my behaviour. I usually brought one of my female students with me. This go-between would enter the house, introduce me, and speak on my behalf. She would then bring back any questions the women might have. I would answer the questions, and back the girl would go. Sometimes she would shuttle back and forth for over an hour. We wasted a lot of time. Often the young girl would not catch all my ideas or the women's questions would get jumbled. It was an inefficient system".

Though inefficient, it was the only way to get the message across. The experience described by him sums up the challenges of operating in BOP societies. It was clear that in such societies, traditional methods of communication just do not work: he operated in an area in which media was not available, the people were poor with literacy and exposure problems, bound by strict traditional norms. Quite rightly, Dr Yunus wondered, "How would we find women borrowers in a country where most poor women had never even seen a bank and where 85 per cent could not read our billboards or advertisements?"

COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES IN BOP MARKETS

The challenges faced by Dr Yunus shows the problem of business communication in many under-developed or media-dark markets. He found that the solution was simple person-to-person communication but that

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