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Gender Bender: Brands focussed on men now wooing women customers

Amit Bapna, ET Bureau Apr 4, 2012, 04:31AM IST

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Aiming iconic beauty brands at men may seem as unimaginable as Philip Morris, of Marlboro Man fame, wooing women consumers. But then Marlboro actually began life as a cigarette for women. By crossing over from one gender to another, marketers today are not looking to do a complete role reversal. Rather they're just attempting to extend brands to a large untapped market - the other half of the species - without destroying the core proposition



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Anglo-Dutch consumer products giant Unilever could seemingly be testing one of its most sharply positioned male brands, Axe, amongst women - a limited edition launch for now. Anarchy will be the first fragrance from the Axe brand that will have a female version packaged in a shimmering silver and glossy pink canister with floral and fruity notes - as against the men's version with fresh and woody strains. With this new avatar, the quintessentially male deo brand that's built recall largely on the back of its cheeky commercials extends the boldness theme to its brand extension strategy. This shift could mark the way forward for marketers in a world in which gender lines are merging.

Brands across categories - from cars to personal care and from denims to alcohol - are on a gender-flirting mission. For some the affair could turn out to be a one nightstand and for others, it may lead to a happily-ever-after marriage. Michael Maedel, President, JWT Asia Pacific, feels that companies in every sector face a fundamental imperative to grow market share and sales. As lines that have traditionally separated male and

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female consumers - those of income, attitudes and expenditure - continue to blur, more companies that have created brands targeting one half of the species are starting to address the other half with variants, he adds.

For instance, [Bacardi](#) has launched Bacardi +, a ready-to-drink mixer available in two variants - cola and lemonade - in the United Kingdom, some parts of Europe, China, Thailand, and now India. This marks a clear shift for the brand in reaching out to the male-drinking populace with its 8% alcohol content to entice the strong beer drinking segment. In contrast Bacardi's Breezers that come in a variety of fruit flavors - and are widely consumed by women - have minimal alcohol content. Mahesh Madhavan, president and CEO South Asia, Bacardi India explains the logic of the new drink for men: "If you peg anything for men in this market, women will drink it, but the reverse doesn't happen. Men will not consume a drink positioned for women for sure. It is unfortunate but that is the way it is the world over."

According to a [JWT global research study](#), brands across different categories need to do more to reach out to women who are earning more, spending more and marrying later than ever before. Brands that have long focused on men - from banks to cars to property - could do a lot more to leverage this trend. Of course when they do, they need to think about how to make their proposition relevant and attractive to women without changing the essence of their core offering.

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Before Axe, there was Allen Solly that had made a sortie into gynec territory. Allen Solly today is more of a unisex brand although the imagery has been predominantly male. The men's range was launched in 1993 and the women's range seven years later. Now, the brand is in the process of a re-branding; the new positioning will also push the gender envelope subtly. Says Sooraj Bhat, brand head, Allen Solly. "Our endeavour is to make the Friday Dressing concept, launched in the mid 90s, acceptable and relevant to women as well. After all nearly a fourth of the brand's share is coming from the women's market."

Conversely, skin care brands globally that were once the domain of women, says Maedel, have been successful in creating mannish lines, from a department store brand like Clarins to a drugstore brand like Nivea. Back home Garnier had been around for over 15 years as a beauty brand for women before it decided to launch a men's range. India is the first market in which the L'Oreal company decided to address the male of the species. Reason: An insight that Indian consumers are less reluctant to use skincare products than in Europe, says Jacques Challes, MD, L'Oreal India. He adds that it was not very risky for Garnier to make the gender-based extension because the values that the brand stands for - efficiency and quality, in a no-nonsense manner - are easily transferable.

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Unilever brand Dove, which is present in categories like body wash, hair care, deos and lotions, has launched a Men+Care range in select markets (excluding India). Says Jennifer Bremner, global brand director, Dove Men+Care: "Our research found that many men were already using women's skin care products, among them Dove. The range has been specifically created to deliver a range of superior products that give men the care they need without sacrificing effectiveness." Bremner adds that for now there are no plans to launch in India.

Over time, the definitions of what are the masculine or feminine dimensions of a society change, depending on the various factors that drive its culture. Explains Sourabh Mishra, chief strategy officer, Saatchi & Saatchi: "In terms of defining a brand's 'gender identity' within that society, what is acceptable at one point in time may not be so at another time." He cites the example of Levi Strauss that was once all about the tough all-American man exploring the wild spaces in search of his fortune. It is doubtful if it could at that time have stood for the 'Levi's Curve ID' that addresses a range of feminine body shapes. But it is perfectly acceptable today because there has been a shift in culture since then.

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The decision to cross over is not without its dangers. Says Dick Maggiore, President & CEO, Innis Maggiore Group, a leading US-based positioning agency: "The greater the brand's equity is established with one gender, the greater it should avoid brand androgyny. While a few new customers of the opposite sex could be gained, you would lose many more existing and potential customers while your brand position erodes." He firmly believes that line extension is almost always a lousy strategy. "The key principle to a positioning strategy is that a brand can only stand for one 'idea' in the mind of its prospects and customers." Small wonder then marketers burn plenty of midnight oil before deciding to target a new set of consumers. As Russell Taylor, global brand vice president, Axe, Unilever points out: "Even as a limited edition this is not a decision we took lightly. The one golden rule is: 'do not break the contract you have with your core target'."

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Rather than looking at the other sex as a vast untapped market that can set the cash registers ringing, marketers need to figure whether their brands actually meet a need of the new set of consumers. Consider Ranbaxy which recently extended Revital, a daily health supplement, to women. According to Brijesh Kapil, vice president, Ranbaxy Global Consumer Healthcare: "The product was developed to meet the special needs of women, and the product was extensively researched with consumers before launch."

In contrast beverage brand Thums Up, whilst claiming to have almost 30% of women consumers, has for some time now been positioned as a 'macho' drink in all its imagery and communication. However, a new campaign, in a first of sorts, has a shapely model doing the same stunts as her male counterparts. But we're still not sure whether that's a gambit to woo more male drinkers - the model is 'shapely', remember - or to invite more women to taste the thunder.

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