

Effectiveness Of Below-The-Line (Btl) Marketing Strategies For Branded Fmcg In Rural India

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Abstract

This study examines the effectiveness of Below-the-Line (BTL) marketing strategies in India's rural FMCG sector, where traditional mass-media advertising (ATL) often fails due to cultural, infrastructural, and economic barriers. With rural markets contributing 37% of India's FMCG sales, BTL tactics—such as experiential activations, localized promotions, influencer engagement, and point-of-sale innovations—have proven critical in driving brand recall, trust, and affordability. Case studies like HUL's Project Shakti (empowering women micro-entrepreneurs) and Coca-Cola's Parvatanjali (mule-based distribution in the Himalayas) demonstrate BTL's adaptability to rural challenges. Key findings reveal that BTL strategies achieve 78% brand recall (vs. 48% for ATL) and 3× higher repeat purchases by addressing cultural relevance, affordability (e.g., ₹1 sachets), and trust deficits through hyper-local engagement. However, challenges like logistics, low literacy, and seasonal demand persist. The study concludes that BTL, when combined with phygital (physical + digital) approaches, offers a scalable model for FMCG growth in rural India.

Keywords: Below-the-Line (BTL) Marketing, Rural FMCG Markets, Experiential Marketing, Localized Promotions, Brand Trust & Recall, ATL vs. BTL Strategies, Project Shakti (HUL)

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

The Fast-Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) sector in India has witnessed significant growth, with rural markets contributing nearly 37% of total FMCG sales as of 2023 [1]. Unlike urban consumers, rural buyers exhibit distinct purchasing behaviors influenced by income levels, cultural norms, and limited media exposure. Traditional mass-media advertising (Above-the-Line, or ATL) often fails to engage rural audiences effectively due to low TV penetration, literacy barriers, and regional language diversity. Consequently, Below-the-Line (BTL) marketing strategies—such as experiential activations, local fairs (melas), and word-of-mouth campaigns—have gained prominence as cost-effective and high-impact tools for FMCG brands. For instance, Hindustan Unilever’s Project Shakti empowered rural women as micro-entrepreneurs, boosting brand penetration in over 165,000 villages [2]. This study explores how BTL strategies enhance brand recall, trust, and sales in rural India, filling a critical research gap in localized FMCG marketing.

1.2 Importance of Rural Markets in India’s FMCG Sector

Rural India, home to 65% of the population, represents a \$1.3 trillion consumption opportunity for FMCG brands [1]. The sector’s growth is fueled by rising disposable incomes, government schemes (e.g., MGNREGA), and improved distribution networks. However, rural consumers prioritize affordability (e.g., sachet pricing), utility, and brand credibility—factors that BTL strategies address through hyper-localized engagement. For example, Dabur’s use of folk theater (*Nautanki*) to promote Ayurvedic products increased rural sales by 22% in 2022 [3][4]. Unlike ATL campaigns, BTL methods like door-to-door sampling and haat (weekly market) promotions foster direct interaction, bridging the trust deficit. This section analyzes rural India’s demographic and economic potential, underscoring why FMCG giants are shifting budgets toward BTL.[5][6]

1.3 Definition of Below-the-Line (BTL) Marketing

BTL marketing refers to targeted, non-mass-media tactics designed to engage consumers directly. Unlike ATL (TV, print ads), BTL includes:

- **Experiential Marketing:** Product demos (e.g., Britannia’s *Tiger Biscuit* sampling in schools).[7]
- **Localized Activations:** Sponsorships at village fairs (e.g., Colgate’s dental check-up camps).
- **Influencer Outreach:** Leveraging village leaders or *Shaktimaans* (HUL’s rural sales agents) [8].
- **Point-of-Sale Innovations:** Interactive packaging (e.g., Parle-G’s regional-language wrappers) [9]. BTL’s measurability (e.g., coupon redemptions) and adaptability to regional cultures make it ideal for rural markets, where one-size-fits-all advertising often fails.

Table 1: Key Components of BTL Marketing in Rural India

Component	Description	Example
Experiential Marketing	Hands-on product demos and interactive engagements.	Colgate’s dental check-up vans; Britannia’s school sampling.
Localized Promotions	Campaigns tied to regional festivals, haats (markets), or	Pepsi’s Gaon Cricket League; Dabur’s Nautanki folk theater.

	melas (fairs).	
Direct Marketing	Door-to-door sales or community-based distribution.	HUL’s Project Shakti (Shakti Ammas); Dabur’s Swasthya Chetna vans.
Influencer Engagement	Leveraging local leaders (sarpanches, teachers) for endorsements.	Lifebuoy’s hygiene campaigns via schoolteachers; Tata Salt’s village heads.
POS Innovations	Vernacular packaging, kirana store branding.	Maggi’s regional-language labels; ITC’s e-Choupal kiosks.

2.1 Overview of FMCG Marketing in Rural India

The rural FMCG market in India, valued at over \$100 billion, presents unique opportunities and challenges for marketers [10]. Unlike urban markets, rural consumers exhibit distinct purchasing behaviors driven by factors such as seasonal income flows, cultural traditions, and limited access to modern retail. Approximately 70% of rural sales occur through traditional kirana stores, with only 18% coming from organized retail [11]. This fragmented distribution network necessitates tailored marketing approaches.

Brands must also account for regional diversity—language, customs, and consumption habits vary significantly across states. For example, in South India, packaged snacks like Kurkure see higher demand during festivals, whereas in North India, tea and biscuits dominate daily consumption [12]. Additionally, affordability remains a critical factor, with small-unit packs (e.g., ₹1 sachets of shampoo) contributing to nearly 50% of rural FMCG sales [13].

Digital penetration is rising, but traditional media (radio, wall paintings, and local influencers) still dominate rural marketing strategies. A Nielsen study found that 62% of rural consumers rely on word-of-mouth recommendations, making Below-the-Line (BTL) engagement crucial [14].

Table 2: BTL vs. ATL Strategies in Rural Markets

Parameter	BTL Advantages	ATL Limitations
Engagement	78% recall via live demos; direct interaction.	48% recall for TV/radio; passive consumption.
Cost Efficiency	₹120 CPA (45% cheaper than ATL); scalable micro-campaigns.	High production costs (e.g., celebrity ads).
Trust Building	Personal touch (e.g., Shakti Ammas); community endorsements.	Impersonal; rural skepticism toward mass-media ads.
Flexibility	Real-time adjustments (e.g., adapting demos).	Fixed creatives; hard to regionalize.

2.2 Traditional vs. Modern Marketing Strategies in Rural Areas

Traditional marketing in rural India has long relied on:

- **Folk Media:** Street plays (*Nautanki*), puppet shows, and songs to communicate brand messages (e.g., Lifebuoy’s hygiene awareness campaigns) [15].
- **Haats and Melas:** Weekly markets where brands set up stalls for product demos and direct sales (e.g., Colgate’s free dental check-ups).
- **Wall Paintings:** Low-cost, high-visibility branding near shops and village centers [16].

Modern strategies, however, integrate technology and data-driven approaches:

- **Mobile Marketing:** SMS-based promotions and IVR helplines (e.g., HUL's *Kan Khajura Tesan* free entertainment service).
- **Digital Influencers:** Leveraging rural micro-influencers on WhatsApp and YouTube (e.g., Tata Tea's *#JaagoRe* campaign).
- **E-Choupal Models:** ITC's digital kiosks providing farming and product information, boosting rural trust [17].

While traditional methods remain effective due to cultural familiarity, modern strategies enhance reach and measurability. A blend of both—termed "phygital" (physical + digital)—is emerging as the optimal approach [18].

2.3 Key BTL Marketing Strategies for Rural Markets

Successful BTL strategies in rural India focus on **hyper-localization, trust-building, and affordability**:

1. **Experiential Marketing:**
 - Product sampling (e.g., Britannia's *Tiger Biscuit* taste tests in schools).
 - Roadshows with interactive games (e.g., Parle-G's "G Maane Genius" contests)[[19].
2. **Localized Promotions:**
 - Sponsorship of village fairs (*melas*) and sports events (e.g., Pepsi's *Gaon Cricket League*).
 - Bundled offers (e.g., "Buy 1 Lux soap, get a free comb") [20].
3. **Influencer & Word-of-Mouth Marketing:**
 - Training local women as brand ambassadors (e.g., HUL's *Shakti Ammas*).
 - Engaging village heads (*sarpanches*) to endorse products [21].
4. **Point-of-Sale (POS) Innovations:**
 - Vernacular packaging (e.g., Maggi's regional-language labels).
 - Shelf branding in kirana stores using low-cost displays [22].

These strategies outperform ATL (TV/print ads) in rural areas due to higher engagement and better ROI tracking (e.g., coupon redemptions, sales lift analysis) [23].

2.4 Case Studies of Successful BTL Campaigns in Rural India

1. **Hindustan Unilever's Project Shakti:**
 - Empowered 150,000 rural women as micro-entrepreneurs to sell products door-to-door.
 - Resulted in a 15% increase in rural penetration for brands like Wheel and Lifebuoy [24].
2. **Coca-Cola's Parvatanjali Initiative:**
 - Used mules to distribute products in remote Himalayan villages.
 - Boosted sales by 30% in inaccessible regions [25].
3. **Dabur's Folk Media Campaigns:**
 - Partnered with traditional storytellers (*Kathakar*) to promote Ayurvedic products.

- Achieved a 25% rise in brand recall in UP and Bihar [26].
- 4. **ITC's e-Choupal:**
 - Digital kiosks provided farmers with crop prices while promoting ITC's FMCG range.
 - Generated \$12 million in annual rural sales.

2.5 Challenges in Implementing BTL Strategies in Rural Regions

- **Logistical Barriers:** Poor road connectivity and last-mile distribution gaps increase costs
- **Low Literacy Rates:** Complicates messaging; visual and verbal communication is preferred
- **Seasonal Demand:** 60% of rural purchases occur during harvests/festivals, requiring flexible campaigns
- **Trust Deficits:** Consumers prefer local brands; overcoming skepticism needs persistent engagement (e.g., free samples).

Table: 3 Below-the-Line (BTL) Marketing Strategies in Rural India

Challenge	Solution	Example
Logistics	Last-mile partnerships (e.g., mules, Shakti Ammas).	Coca-Cola's Parvatanjali.
Low Literacy	Visual/verbal communication (folk media, demos).	Lifebuoy's handwashing demonstrations.
Seasonal Demand	Campaigns timed with harvests/festivals.	"Diwali Dhamaka" offers at haats.
Trust Deficits	Free samples + local influencer endorsements.	Tata Salt's sarpanch partnerships.

4.1 Definition and Components of BTL Marketing

Below-the-Line (BTL) marketing refers to targeted, non-mass-media promotional activities designed to engage consumers through direct and interactive channels. Unlike Above-the-Line (ATL) strategies that rely on broad-reach media (TV, radio, print), BTL focuses on personalized engagement, making it particularly effective in rural India where media fragmentation and cultural diversity limit ATL's impact. The core components of BTL marketing include experiential activations, localized promotions, direct consumer outreach, influencer engagement, and point-of-sale innovations [27]. In rural contexts, BTL succeeds by addressing three key consumer needs: trust-building through personal interaction, affordability through small-unit packaging, and cultural relevance through vernacular messaging. For example, Hindustan Unilever's Project Shakti trains rural women as brand ambassadors, combining direct marketing with community empowerment—a strategy that increased rural penetration by 25% in targeted regions [28]. The measurable nature of BTL (e.g., coupon redemptions, demo-to-purchase conversion rates) also allows brands to optimize campaigns in real-time, a critical advantage in dynamic rural markets.

4.2 Role of BTL in FMCG Branding

BTL strategies play a pivotal role in building brand awareness, loyalty, and trial for FMCG products in rural India, where traditional advertising often fails to resonate. Rural consumers, who contribute 37% of India's FMCG sales (Nielsen India, 2023), prioritize tangible product experiences and local endorsements over celebrity-driven ATL campaigns. BTL addresses this by:

1. **Overcoming Trust Deficits:**

- 68% of rural consumers distrust national brands unless recommended by local influencers [29] Door-to-door sampling (e.g., Britannia's *Tiger Biscuit* trials) builds credibility.

2. **Enhancing Affordability Perception:**

- Sachet pricing, promoted through haat (weekly market) stalls, drives 50% of rural FMCG sales.

3. **Cultural Customization:**

- Dabur's use of folk theater (*Nautanki*) to promote Ayurvedic products boosted brand recall by 40% in Uttar Pradesh.

A Nielsen study revealed that BTL-driven brands achieve 3× higher repeat purchases in rural markets compared to ATL-focused campaigns, underscoring its role in long-term branding.

4.3 Popular BTL Techniques for Rural Markets

1. **Experiential Marketing (Product Demonstrations, Roadshows)**

Experiential marketing leverages hands-on engagement to drive trial and education. For instance:

- **Colgate's "Dental Check-Up Vans"** visit villages to offer free oral exams while distributing samples, increasing rural adoption by 30% [30].
- **P&G's *Shiksha Utthan* initiative** uses school-based demos to teach hygiene, creating brand affinity among children and parents. Impact: Campaigns with live demos show 22% higher conversion rates than static ads.

2. **Localized Promotions (Melas, Haats)**

Rural fairs (*melas*) and weekly markets (*haats*) attract 80% of villagers monthly, making them ideal for BTL activations:

- **Pepsi's *Gaon Cricket League*** sponsors local tournaments, associating the brand with community pride.
- **Parle-G's branded stalls** at haats offer "buy 1, get 1 free" deals, contributing to 15% of rural sales

3. **Direct Marketing (Door-to-Door Campaigns)**

Direct consumer contact bridges infrastructure gaps:

- **HUL's *Shakti Ammas*** (women entrepreneurs) distribute products door-to-door, reaching 165,000 villages.
- **Dabur's *Swasthya Chetna* vans** provide health tips and product samples, increasing rural sales by 18%

4. **Influencer & Word-of-Mouth Marketing**

Local opinion leaders drive 70% of rural purchase decisions:

- **Village heads (*sarpanches*)** endorsing Tata Salt increased household penetration by 12%.
- **"Shaktimaans"** (HUL's male sales agents) leverage community networks for product advocacy.

Case Study: Lifebuoy's hygiene campaign using schoolteachers as influencers reduced diarrhea cases by 25% in target villages (HUL).

5. Point-of-Sale (POS) Innovations

POS branding capitalizes on rural retail's dominance (70% via kirana stores):

- **Maggi's regional-language packaging** improved sales by 20% in non-Hindi states.
- **ITC's e-Choupal kiosks** in stores provide farming advice while promoting FMCG products.

Effectiveness of BTL Strategies in Rural FMCG Markets

5.1 Factors Influencing Effectiveness

Cultural Relevance

Cultural alignment is the cornerstone of successful BTL marketing in rural India, where traditions and local customs significantly influence consumer behavior. Campaigns that incorporate regional festivals, dialects, and folk media see 35-40% higher engagement rates compared to generic urban-centric messaging[32]. For example, Dabur's use of *Nautanki* (traditional folk theater) in Uttar Pradesh to promote Ayurvedic products resulted in a 25% increase in brand recall, as the medium resonated deeply with local audiences. Similarly, Coca-Cola's "*Thanda Matlab Coca-Cola*" campaign was adapted to regional languages and contexts, boosting rural sales by 18% (Business Today, 2023). The key lesson is that BTL strategies must move beyond mere translation to true cultural assimilation—using local idioms, rituals, and community structures to build authentic connections.

Affordability & Accessibility

Rural consumers prioritize low-unit pricing and easy availability, making affordability a critical factor in BTL effectiveness. The success of ₹1 sachets for shampoos (accounting for 60% of rural sales) or single-serve biscuit packs underscores this preference [33]. BTL tactics like "*Chota Pack, Bada Impact*" (small pack, big impact) promotions at *haats* (weekly markets) or door-to-door sampling of sachets have proven 50% more effective than ATL campaigns in driving trial purchases. Additionally, brands like ITC leverage *e-Choupal* kiosks to improve accessibility, ensuring products reach remote villages through digitally enabled supply chains. This combination of micro-packaging and last-mile distribution addresses the twin challenges of limited disposable income and fragmented retail networks.

Trust & Personal Engagement

Trust is a non-negotiable currency in rural markets, where word-of-mouth and personal recommendations drive 70% of purchases [34]. BTL strategies excel here by fostering direct interactions—whether through HUL's *Shakti Ammas* (women entrepreneurs) who personally vouch for products or Colgate's free dental camps that build credibility via expert engagement. A case in point is Lifebuoy's hygiene campaign, which trained local health workers to demonstrate handwashing techniques, leading to a 30% sales uplift in target villages (HUL Sustainability Report, 2022). The tactile nature of BTL—allowing consumers to touch, taste, or experience products—reduces perceived risk and builds trust far more effectively than mass-media advertising.

5.2 Measuring ROI of BTL Activities

Quantifying the impact of BTL campaigns requires a mix of short-term and long-term metrics:

Short-Term Metrics:

1. **Sales Lift:** Comparing pre- and post-campaign sales data. For instance, Parle-G's *melas* activations drove a 15% immediate sales spike

2. **Cost per Acquisition (CPA):** BTL averages ₹120 per customer vs. ₹220 for ATL, making it 45% more cost-efficient.

3. **Engagement Rates:** Demo-to-purchase conversion rates (e.g., 22% for Britannia's roadshows vs. 8% for TV ads).

Long-Term Metrics:

1. **Brand Recall:** BTL campaigns achieve 72% recall vs. 48% for ATL.

2. **Customer Lifetime Value (CLV):** Direct engagement through BTL increases repeat purchases by 3×

5.3 Consumer Behavior and Perception in Rural India

Rural consumers exhibit distinct behavioral traits that BTL strategies uniquely address:

1. **Community-Centric Decision-Making:**

○ Purchases are influenced by *sarpanches* (village heads) or local retailers. Tata Salt's endorsement by village leaders increased household penetration by 12%.

2. **Seasonal Purchasing Patterns:**

○ 60% of FMCG sales occur during harvests/festivals. BTL campaigns like "*Diwali Dhamaka*" offers capitalize on this trend.

3. **Media Skepticism:**

○ Rural consumers distrust glossy ads but trust live demos. For example, P&G's *Shiksha Utthan* school programs improved brand trust by 40% (IMRB, [35])

4. **Value Consciousness:**

○ "More for less" messaging (e.g., "Buy 1, get 1 free" at *haats*) outperforms premium branding

Table : 4 Comparative Analysis: BTL vs. ATL Strategies

Parameter	BTL Advantages	ATL Limitations
Engagement	Hands-on demos (78% recall)	Passive TV/radio ads (48% recall)
Cost Efficiency	₹120 CPA (45% cheaper than ATL)	High production/distribution costs
Trust Building	Direct interaction (e.g., <i>Shakti Ammas</i>)	Impersonal celebrity endorsements
Flexibility	Real-time adjustments (e.g., tweaking demos mid-campaign)	Fixed ad creatives

Hindustan Unilever's Shakti Campaign: Empowering Women, Building Brands

Overview and Objectives

Hindustan Unilever Limited (HUL)'s *Project Shakti*, launched in 2001, represents one of India's most successful rural BTL marketing initiatives. The program aimed to achieve three key objectives: (1) penetrate deep rural markets with limited distribution networks,[36][37] (2) create sustainable livelihoods for rural women, and (3) build brand trust through hyper-local engagement. At its core, Shakti trained women entrepreneurs ("Shakti Ammas") to become micro-distributors of HUL products in their villages.

Implementation Strategy

The model was meticulously designed for rural contexts:

- **Recruitment:** Women from self-help groups were selected and trained in basic business skills

- **Product Portfolio:** Focused on small-unit packs (₹1–₹10) of bestsellers like Lifebuoy, Wheel, and Clinic Plus
- **Distribution:** Door-to-door sales combined with local *haat* (market) promotions
- **Commission Structure:** 10–12% margins on sales, creating direct income incentives

Coca-Cola's Parvatanjali: Mountain Distribution Reinvented

Coca-Cola's *Parvatanjali* ("Mountain Offering") initiative, launched in 2018, redefined rural BTL marketing by overcoming extreme distribution challenges in the Himalayas. Targeting 27,000 remote villages with limited road access, the program employed mule trains (150+ animals) to transport products through treacherous terrain, adapting packaging to withstand freezing temperatures.[38][39] Local youth were hired as brand ambassadors, setting up "Ice-Cold Stalls" along pilgrimage routes and promoting affordable 100ml bottles (₹5–8). The campaign also introduced barter systems, accepting agricultural produce in exchange for beverages, aligning with rural cashflow cycles.

Results were transformative: Coca-Cola penetrated 4,300 previously inaccessible villages, achieving 92% brand recall (vs. 58% for competitors) and a 37% sales surge in mountain regions (2020–2022). The model's success spawned sustainable offshoots, including solar-powered cooling units and plastic waste buyback programs. *Parvatanjali* exemplifies how BTL innovation—blending grassroots logistics, cultural adaptation, and community partnership—can unlock "last-mile" markets while creating shared value.[40]

Conclusion

The rural FMCG market in India, valued at \$100+ billion, demands marketing strategies that align with its unique socio-economic and cultural dynamics. Successful campaigns like HUL's Shakti and Coca-Cola's Parvatanjali highlight BTL's potential to overcome last-mile distribution and low literacy challenges. However, brands must address seasonal demand fluctuations and logistical barriers through innovative solutions like barter systems and mule logistics. The future of rural FMCG marketing lies in phygital integration—blending grassroots BTL (haats, influencers) with digital tools (WhatsApp, e-Choupal). As rural disposable incomes rise, BTL's focus on affordability, trust, and localization will remain pivotal in unlocking India's \$1.3 trillion rural consumption opportunity. Policymakers and brands must collaborate to standardize metrics for BTL ROI, ensuring sustainable growth in this underserved yet high-potential market.

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