



# The Desolation of Smog

Air Purifiers are selling faster than hot cakes with little or no marketing. The start of a new category or a flash in the pan?

By Shephali Bhatt

**B**e it the blackout during the 47th Super Bowl, the demonetisation of our currency's biggest notes, or even the Uri attack; brands are quick to 'leverage' events to connect or sell. To the point where one is surprised when brands let an opportunity to latch on, slide.

When the national capital and its surrounding regions witnessed the worst smog in 17 years post Diwali last month, people finally woke up to the need for air purifying technology. Yet, air purifiers was one category conspicuous by its absence from mass media.

It's not like brands didn't advertise at all, but the ones that did were few and far between: Only Philips and Kent RO rolled out pre-Diwali TV commercials, as per TV analytics and audience targeting tech startup Zapr. And none of the major jacket-ad-fest variety that's become the standard for ecommerce players. When people came in droves to shop for air purifiers, most of them didn't know who of the 100 players in the fray is the 'Colgate' of the category.

This was simply because it's a nascent category. Brands have spent the last two years

or so educating the trade about the technology and doing several small-time on-ground activities. Not much has been done to create brand awareness. Consumers were relying largely on the retailer's word, admits Girish Bapat, sales director - West and South Asia, for air purifier company Blueair. Even after Diwali, when the need for the category suddenly spiked, most players remained silent, except Panasonic and Eureka Forbes. Daikin, one of Japan's largest manufacturers of air purifiers, is still figuring its India advertising strategy out.

## Why no mauke pe chauka?

What stopped eight out of 10 key players from striking while the iron was smogging hot? The consumer herself. "Air purifiers has a small segment of mature customers. We've been selling this product in India for over four years now. We've had to push the product all this while. Consumer sales were almost dead," says Rajesh Jain, SVP - sales, at Daikin India.

Now, advertising is a business decision. It has to be commensurate to the volume of sales. How will a brand allocate funds towards marketing a product that's not making the company any money? The brands were simply not prepared for the excessive demand. Most of the durable

major brands were instead focusing on promoting TVs, ACs, and refrigerators: the usual safe bets.

And right now, there is shortage of air purifier stock. Jain told us how 700 of Daikin's air purifiers were kept unsold with a distributor for the last six months. All of them were sold out within three days of Diwali.

## Out of stock to out of mind?

That all air purifiers are increasingly getting sold out and demand has exceeded supply is a good thing, you'd say. Especially when there was so little done in terms of marketing individual brands. Not entirely. Blue Air's Bapat tells us how the product's enquiries have gone up tenfold since last year, but only a fraction of those have converted to sales. "I'm not sure if this growth in demand will sustain," he says.

It's just a sign of people acting out of panic, some players feel. "Let this smog go away, and you'll see people stop buying air purifiers. Their fear will go away," says Syed Moonis Ali Alvi, GM - water purifier and air purifier, Panasonic India.

People shell out ₹50,000 for a mobile phone at the drop of a hat, but think 10 times before buying an air purifier, Alvi notes. He faced the same challenge while building the water purifier category a few years ago: most people didn't feel the need for purification because they couldn't assess if the water was clean or dirty unless it was muddy. "Now, having a water purifier has become a necessity," he says, with a strong sense of relief. Perhaps, air purifiers will have to go through a similar struggle.

## Maybe advertising isn't the answer?

There are brands like Philips that projected air purifiers as a gifting idea to consumers, in addition to releasing a TVC and a few print adverts in national and regional

newspapers. The brand even associated with two airlines to draw attention of captive audience. It must have paid off to some extent given that Snapdeal claims Philips was the top selling brand in the category on the ecomm portal this festive season, pre and post. Eureka Forbes was the first runner up, followed by Kent.

However, some players feel people need to be educated about the product and its significance before anyone can think of brand awareness.

Marzin Shroff, CEO - direct sales, and SVP - marketing, at Eureka Forbes, says, "In order to create product awareness, we look at the Army and not the Air Force. Indian consumer needs to be told about regulatory standards, filter quality, filter replacement duration, Internet of Things that can make air purifiers more efficient. This can only happen by knocking on people's doors. By educating kids in schools, educating traffic police about their health while they breathe highly polluted air."

Shroff maintains his brand will spend one-tenth of its marketing budget on mass media. "We don't want to be opportunistic. We want to build the category, and not take away market share from others. We are not sprinters. We are marathon runners," he concludes.

It's no less than a marathon for the rest of them as well. Now to see who's the first to the finish line.

## Purifiers Sold

2015  
40,000  
2016  
1,00,000  
2021  
10,00,000  
Market Now  
₹150cr  
Five Years From Now  
₹1,500cr

SOURCE & PROJECTIONS: INDUSTRY