



Mission Rural Lifeline (MRL)

How ECG enabled a Client¹ to successfully pivot their business during the COVID-19 pandemic

Background to the Project

Our Client, a Rs.200 crore rural e-commerce company operates in 16 states with primary focus on **Consumer Durables**. In 2020, owing to the pandemic and the subsequent lockdown, the Client looked to pivot away from its traditional consumer durables business. Additionally, the *Client also wanted to examine ways to stay engaged with their customers given the challenge of their inability to ensure face to face interactions.*

ECG, through the **9 months** of the transition from **March 2020** to **December 2020** partnered with the Client to carry out multiple projects aimed at the **twin objectives** outlined above.

ECG Approach

Collaborative Partnership with the Client

The engagement required multiple studies to be undertaken simultaneously in a relatively short span of time. Given the need to work collaboratively as time was of essence, common teams comprising Client and ECG staff were created at both the **Strategic (Core Group)** and **Operational (Working Group) Levels**. The project objectives for each initiative and exchange of ideas were facilitated through the Core Group; while *planning, roles and responsibilities, solving emerging issues, updates and changes in approach were discussed/communicated* in the Working Group. While the communication with the Core Group happened at defined periodicity, the operational group communicated on a daily basis to ensure seamless workflow.

Internal Re-skilling

ECG trained its Research Executives again to ensure all customer and non-customer outreach was swift, clear and decisive. ECG's proprietary tools and techniques were used to enable the Research staff to generate outputs in a time-efficient manner.

Key Project Elements

While several projects were undertaken under the **MRL umbrella**, a few key ones have been outlined below.

The FMCG Business Launch

Tamil Nadu

Drawing on the positive outcome from a pilot study that ECG had conducted for the Client in 2018 in **select districts of Tamil Nadu** to understand the **appetite for curated FMCG boxes** amongst their **rural customers**, the Client had pivoted their business to launch its FMCG business to **home-deliver** curated FMCG boxes to its **supply constrained** rural customers. ECG's role was to conduct a study focusing on *customer feedback on the product (quality, quantity, brand, product mix, product category mix), pricing, delivery, and channel*. During this, their general buying behavior and impact of COVID on their consumption behaviour was also captured.

The study was conducted across **5 phases** in **3 important regions** of a **select district**. ECG teams engaged with **278 customers** across *towns, taluks, village panchayats, villages as well as hamlets*. In each phase, based on the experience of the preceding phase, recommendations were made as to the **overall box size (in price terms), choice of products, brands, packet size, quantity**, etc.

Based on the customer feedback from the Post-Launch Study, ECG **curated higher priced boxes** of multiple price ranges for the Client to consider for launch. Significant inputs were also provided on the choice of **products/brands/quantity/packet size** across each of the curated boxes.

Karnataka

In **Hubli-Dharwad district** of Karnataka, our Client in **partnership** with a **well-established NGO** decided to launch a **pilot FMCG project** across **10 significantly large villages**. The highlight of this pilot project was *identifying and engaging local influencers or able individuals from the local community as Micro-entrepreneurs* to facilitate the order placement process.

While reviewing the ongoing Pilot, the Core Group with significant input from ECG, recognised the need to focus on 2 key aspects, leading to the following:

- 1) **Business Model Efficacy Study:** ECG reached out to **~80 consumers spanning 6 villages including hamlets** which were at a distance ranging from **15kms to ~60 kms** from the **main towns**. The sample consisted of our **Client's customers, consumers who had not previously purchased from our Client** and **channel partners** (*micro-entrepreneurs, other field staff*) who engaged in the day-day operations of the business.

The study covered reasons for *purchase, quantum of purchase, preferred channel of purchase, preferred payment methods, feedback on products (quality, quantity, brand) and their typical FMCG spend.*

Additionally, the study also focused on understanding the Micro-entrepreneurs' perspective of -

- a) Their association with our Client
- b) Different aspects of the operations
- c) Customers' needs; and the
- d) Neighbourhood.

Based on the feedback from the **Micro-entrepreneurs**, ECG also provided valuable inputs to the Client on aspects involving **selection of the right Micro-entrepreneurs, defining the role of the Micro-entrepreneurs, onboarding and training**, etc.

- 2) **Consumption Study:** While it was a priority to gauge the efficacy of the newly launched business model and its operations, it was equally important to understand '**consumption behaviour and experience**' and '**expectations**' of the target customers. Our team engaged with **~80 consumers** focussing on:
 - a) Monthly FMCG spend
 - b) Monthly consumption behaviour across different product categories in terms of quantity & brands
 - c) General Brand Awareness
 - d) Availability of products, brands, shops and credit offering by these shops in their neighbourhood.

COVID Impact Study and Trend Analyses

During the 9 months in transition, ECG recommended that it is important to understand how the needs & desires and the buying behaviour of the target customers had changed since the pandemic, the challenges faced in procuring products, shifts in brand loyalty, livelihood challenges and their willingness to purchase FMCG through e-commerce.

This deep dive study covered **~3300 customers** across **55 districts** spanning **3 states, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal and Odisha**. All the respondents of the study were women between **ages 20-67** with **monthly household incomes** ranging from **less than Rs.1000 to Rs.50,000**. The highlight of this study was that the majority of the respondents were from **towns/villages** with population **less than 50,000**, thus truly echoing the sentiments of “Rural India”. ECG carried out this project during different phases of the pandemic (**from Week 2 of lockdown to Unlock 2.0**) to understand the live impact of the pandemic on rural consumers.

In collaboration with the Client, key excerpts were shared across print and electronic media, both National and vernacular.

Neighbourhood Awareness Study

As the pandemic had precluded field visits, we engaged with about **~800 odd customers** across **4 districts** of **Tamil Nadu** and **9 districts** of **Karnataka telephonically** to gather insights on the **Customers’ Neighbourhood** in terms of:

- a. availability of type and size and shops
- b. product and preferred brand availability
- c. bulk and regular products buying behaviour
- d. credit; bulk and regular discount; and payment options available
- e. consumption from PDS
- f. normal brand affinity and any changes in the pandemic scenario.

In **Tamil Nadu**, we engaged with customers from locations having **population** ranging from **less than 10,000 to just above 1,00,000**. These locations were **upto 50 kms away** from the nearest **main town(s)**. In Karnataka, the study was spread across Southern, Central and Eastern regions.

Migrant Survey

The Client was desirous of partnering with **local NGOs** to provide **livelihood opportunities**, particularly to the **migrant population**. To enable this, we carried out a limited Pilot study among the **migrants** in **Hubli-Dharwad districts** of **Karnataka** to understand their *current needs as well as their current working and livelihood status*.

Health and Hygiene Survey

As a Pilot initiative, ECG conducted a study across **115 respondents** in **3 districts** of **Tamil Nadu** to understand their Healthcare needs and Personal Care requirements and preferences and the impact of the pandemic on their general hygiene behaviour, especially amongst women and girls.

Customer Engagement Experiment

Our Client's customers have always been an integral part of their business ecosystem and their field teams continually engaged with the customers through regular interactions. Owing to the pandemic, the Client was looking for an alternate channel to stay engaged with their customers.

ECG partnered with the Client to conduct an **experiment** to **identify an acceptable social media platform** that would allow **continuous engagement** with the customers beyond the traditional transactional relationship.

This engagement started with ECG interacting with **~300** of the **Clients' customers** across **5 select districts** of **Tami Nadu** to understand:

- a. Smartphones/Tablets/laptops ownership
- b. Access to Internet
- c. Frequent Mobile Applications used
- d. Presence on social media
- e. Time spent on Social Media
- f. Type of Content being consumed
- g. Preference for alternative contents
- h. Children's interests and their influence across many of the above aspects.

Based on the feedback from the study, ECG initiated this experiment with **~160 customers** (Out of the ~300 customer, all of whom had expressed interest in this engagement) through **WhatsApp Business Application**. ECG curated **vernacular content** across *vocational, informative, entertainment and educational* categories specifically aligned to the interests of the

customers. The engagement's progress was observed closely by keeping track of key parameters like *Messages read, Responses received, Types of Responses received*, etc.

In order to obviate the faceless nature of the engagement, ECG created a **unique personal character** aligned to local sensibilities, in many **moods** and **avatars**. All content specially curated for the customers were shared through the unique personal character, effectively acting as the '**face**' and '**voice**' of the Client.

Project Outcomes

ECG's insights and strategic advice based on the results of the multiple studies enabled the Client to formulate a customer driven framework while retaining focus on key business parameters to ensure seamless transition to this new venture and maintaining constant engagement with their customers.

Project Timeline

These multiple projects were undertaken between **March 2020** and **December 2020**.