

Impact of promotional activities and campaigns on buying decision of agricultural seeds

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Abstract

Agricultural is a profession, which involves key buying decisions at different intervals of time for the same crop in same season for different inputs starting from Seed, Fertilisers and Pesticides. Seed purchase is one of the critical decisions for farmers to start the agricultural activities. There are different brand awareness and promotion activities done by marketers to influence the buying decision of the customer. The purpose of this study is to explore the impact of promotional activities and campaigns on consumers buying decision. The promotional activities such as one to one farmers contact, group meetings, brand and promotion through posters, banners and various engagement campaigns conducted by seed companies have been considered. The study also covered the impact of live demonstrations, user farmer testimonials and brand ambassadors and the influence of various farmer fairs and government agricultural extension activities. A qualitative study through focus group discussions in three districts and six villages of Punjab cotton and rice crops growing belt were studied. These farmer groups were diverse in age ranging from 22 years to 50 years and some of them having exposure of social media as they use smart phones. The outcome of study showed that own experience of farmer testing seeds in his own farm has major impact on buying decision, advice from fellow farmers, friend or relative stands second in terms of influencing buying decision of seeds. Majority of activities where notions are very strong of acquisition of new customer like field demonstrations are not very well accepted by farmers unless done in their own village. The study has geographical limitations, focused around seeds and farmers growing cotton and rice crops. The results of study are giving an indication that marketers need to focus more on live demonstrations and appointing brand ambassadors from satisfied set of farmers as these are impactful to influence the purchase decision. A large spends of promotional budgets by marketers on various other activities need to be evaluated further through more elaborative research in agricultural inputs to rationalize the results at various stages of product i.e. introduction, growth, maturity and decline.

Keywords: Brand Awareness. Buying decision. Customer acquisition. Brand Ambassadors. Seeds.

1. Introduction

India is Among top three leading economies of the world, ranked 3rd currently, behind US and China (\$ 2.1 trillion). India is among top two producers of major crops like Paddy, wheat, sugarcane, groundnut, vegetables, fruit and cotton (<https://blog.farmguide.in>). Agriculture is the backbone of the Indian economy; it is the main source of economic livelihood for majority of the population of our country and contributes to ~17% to the nation's GDP. Among major crops, Cotton is the first crop in India to get approvals from regulators for genetically modified seeds. Since technology has given a big advantage over major pest on crop (American Bollworm) reducing major input cost alongwith increase in yield, so adoption of genetically modified hybrid seeds was very fast and today it has achieved 95% of total cropped areas (Indian Seed industry Sources). While at initial stages of first ten years of introduction on Hybrid GM Seeds (till 2010), technology itself remained a prime attraction for farmers to look for cotton seeds, but afterwards the technology became a commodity with increase in number of seed selling companies in the market offering similar technology i.e. Bollgaud II. Thus a role of marketers took a challenging turn to go for various Promotional activities for brand awareness thus influencing the buying decision of customers for retaining as well acquiring new sets to increase sales and market share.

Rural areas of India (Rural is where agriculture is practiced), is now experiencing improvement in basic infrastructure, better education levels, better road connectivity has improved transportation links to cities and highways, electricity reaching remote parts touching villages and mediums of communication have changed now, Verma (2012). More media reach, increasing aspirations of rural population and product customization demand for rural customers are some more factors leading to rural markets on growth trends. Marketing as a function and concept has evolved a lot in last two decades in Agri inputs sector of Indian markets and there are lot of innovations in advertising, creating buzz marketing, promotional inputs, displays and communication mediums evolved during this period. Also seed is a live product has shorter life cycle at marketplace. So, this becomes very significant to build brand awareness with rigorous efforts, to achieve a sizable business volume and market share before it starts declining, hence phased out.

The biggest challenge as shared by some experts of agricultural seeds market in India, for a product of short life span, product itself can not be a brand in customers (farmers) mind. So it will be an umbrella brand which should be kept alive in customer's mind and products can keep moving from introduction to phase out stages. Every Hybrid seed is unique for each

company and has own Unique Selling Propositions (USPs) to highlights in various promotional campaigns and activities. Most of the marketers in seed industry design the the set of promotional activities and campaign keeping in mind these USPs, so emphasis and spends on most effective activity should be designed in accordance. It has been observed that there is big commonality among these activities among various players as far as conceptual part is concerned. The differentiations have been observed in innovative display inputs used by them and also the rigor of execution. A customer (farmer) sometimes attending similar set of activities from different players during the same sales season i.e. prior to actual purchase of seeds, so it becomes very important to understand if anyone of these is giving any impact to influence his buying decision or none of these.

2. Literature Review

As 95% are of cotton cultivation in India is under Bt. Cotton seeds, so in saturated markets, the competition of retaining and acquiring customers is more intense among different operating companies (Gajjar, 2013). Thus providing ideal information about products resulting in positive impact on customer attitude to change their perceptions about offerings from the company is must (Noor & Kanwal, 2013). So depending upon customer profile and situations, every company designs a set of promotional activities or campaigns. But it is not necessary, that all the promotional activities and campaigns shall provide the similar or expected outcome always (Saerang and Pangemanan, 2014). Thus it is becoming difficult for the organisation to exactly foresee which activity to be planned for a better outcome (Lin and Chen, 2006). Jha (2013) studied brand preferences in reference to FMCG products, concluded that price, promotional deals and availability have significant impact on consumer purchase decisions in rural areas. Quality of product and pack designs are also important in rural markets. Marketers should design a promotional strategy providing messages which are communicative and compatible in terms of their understanding. Hoyer and Brown, (1990) in their study of brand awareness effects on repeat purchase in a given set of brand concluded that customer tend to buy the brand known to him in given set of products, even if it has some considerations compare to other products.

Kumar, Rajiv & Rupa, (2016) in study comparative study of branded and non-branded milk in Haryana, gave results that illiteracy, low income and low purchase behaviour of rural consumers restricts them to use more non branded products. Mishra et al., (2016) found in their study of brand strategy for a newly launched product, that dealer's advise plays

important role to influence buying decision of farmers in this category. Van campaign was also found very effective way among promotional activities in category of pesticides to influence buying. Farmers are mostly loyal to brands, so is difficult to shift them to other products. Verma (2012) in study of consumer brand awareness level study in rural markets concluded that market having well connected infrastructure with urban markets e.g. roads, proximity to highways and younger lot of population in rural areas have better awareness of brands. The older population still sticks to older brand. Ladha (2015) in study of buying behavior and brand awareness of durable products, found that there is need of customised product approach fitting to unique needs of rural markets. The information access ease has brought in a significant change in consumer behavior across all consumer segments. As per John and William (1986) market promotional activities to boost sales are more result delivering than advertising, publicity and personal selling. Tiwari Jyoti (2015) again emphasised that promotional activities in agricultural inputs market has a positive impact to influence the farmers on buying behavior.

Totten & Block (1996) and Kotler (2002) emphasised that any activity designed for a short period which pushes or enhance a sudden and bigger movements of wholesale or retail and also influences the customers to buy a product can be defined as sales promotion. According to Lammers (1991) sampling to perspective customers effects consumer buying behavior and has a positive relationship on fast selling procedure. Some other researchers Parmataris (2001), Fill (2002), Shimp (2003) also agreed on same that positive effect on consumer buying behavior certainly be enhanced with free sampling. But this positive relationship is not agreed by Jackaria and Gilbert (2002) as they said that it may differ from product to product and also on specific timelines. Afterwards Ndubisi and Chiew (2006) later on agreed to the positive relationship of free sampling on consumers buying behavior. In discussions with Indian seed industry experts, they also strongly emphasised that seed is a live product so unless a customer see a live field in comparison to other seeds or seeds he is currently using, the chances of switching to newer product or brand are less. So free sampling coupled with activities like field day and harvest days, which are showing the performance at the time of maturity of crop in field in comparison to other seeds (field day) and if possible to show them live harvesting comparison (harvest day) with a competitive hybrid seeds should have a bigger impact. But another challenge is to keep this impact live in mind of farmer till next purchase which is after 5-6 months from this activity is where all other activities play a major role.

3. Methodology

The study was conducted in major cotton growing districts Bathinda, Fazilka and Mansa of Punjab (India) Fig. 1. Punjab is among major states of cotton crop cultivations in India. The farmers in this state are believed to be progressive, using high quality inputs and innovative. Punjab as state has better infrastructure, road connectivity and mobile phones penetrations.

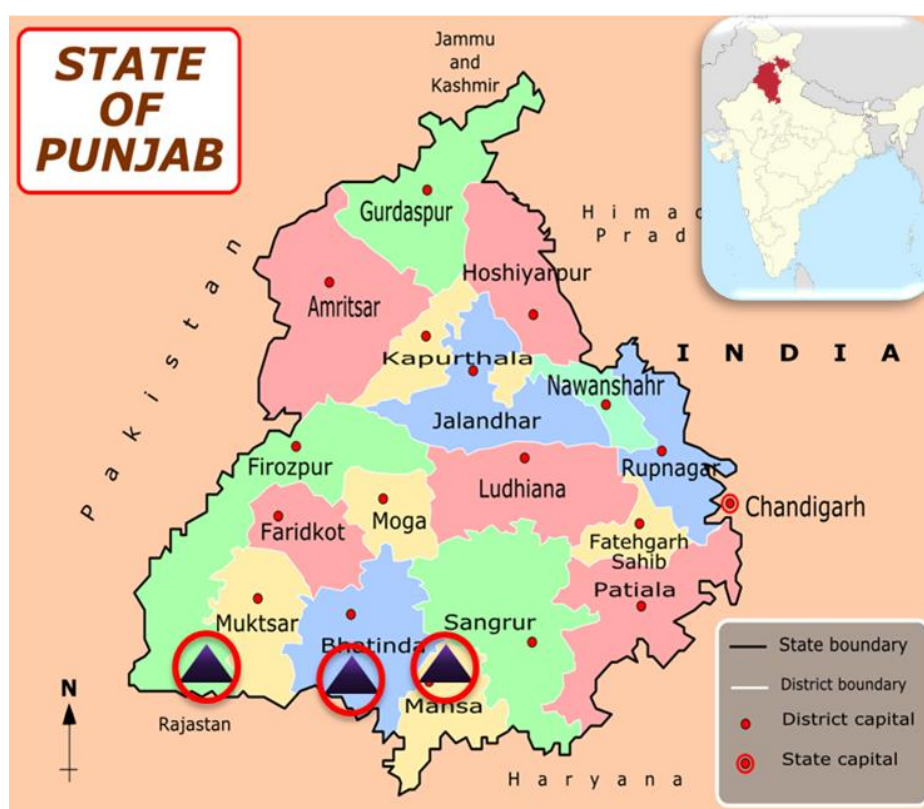


Fig 1: Map of Punjab

Source: Map of India

A qualitative research through Focused Group Discussions (FGDs) of structured group was conducted in 6 (six) different villages of, 3 (Three) districts of Punjab states of India. The study was conducted in core BT Cotton crop growing areas and 40 farmers participated in the study and out of them, 34 shared their complete details of crop acreages also. (Table 1)

Table 1: Details of participant farmers in the study:

State	Districts	No. of Villages	Farmer's No. (with details)	Cotton Crop Acres		Acreages % OLY*
				2017	2018	
Punjab	Bathinda	4	22	118	110.5	-6%
	Fazilka	2	8	153	134	-12%
	Mansa	1	4	34	20.5	-40%
	Total	7	34	305	265	-13%

*OLY: Over Last Year,

Author's Compilation

The farmers groups were diverse in age ranging from 22 years to 50 years, education is from illiterate to graduation, smart phone users to without phone, few of them were aware of social media applications like Facebook, WhatsApp, some of them are listening to FM radio, most of them are regular visitors to “Krishi Melas” (Farmer’s fairs) organised by State Agricultural Universities and Department of Agriculture and very few of them are newspaper readers.

4. Various Promotional Activities:

As per seed industry experts there are three kind of activities or campaigns done by various companies during a complete year around in a seeds market:

- Pre – Season activities: The timing of these activities is 2-3 months prior to actual purchase by farmers or during purchase timings
- Post sales activities: The activities conducted near maturity of the crop or at harvesting time of the crop.
- Off Season activities: The activities after sowing till maturity and after harvesting till beginning of pre-sales activities

All these activities are supervised by on roll employees of seed companies, but they also hire two types of resources locally. First category is Field Development officers or Market Development Officers (FDOs or MDOs). They are hired through a 3rd party resourcing company and they remain almost throughout the years working with a company. The education levels of them is normally graduates of agriculture or any other stream. But they all have working experience. They work is fixed geographies and cover around 40 to 50 villages in their allocated areas. There is another manpower called Field Assistants (FAs) and

their job is mainly to do posterings, arrangements of farmer meetings and distribution of communication material among farmers. They work in pre-season activities for 4-5 months. Their education level are normally school pass out or dropouts. But these FAs are hired from local areas, so they are well versed with the geography to organise various events. FDOs as per seed industry experts are trained technically and also on softer skill to handle various activities independently while companies don't spend any effort or money of training FAs, beyond product specifications because they may move to any other company also in next year.

4.1. Types of various promotional Activities/campaigns

Pre - Season	Post Sales	Off Season
1. Market communication Material	1. Field days or Field visits	1. Demo boards at demonstrations locations
2. Audio Visual Vans	2. Harvest Days	2. Appointing brand ambassadors
3. Wall Paintings	3. Farmer's trainings on crop agronomy	3. Digital campaigns
4. Postering in markets		4. Experience sharing among farmers groups
5. Village level meetings		5. Wall paintings
6. Individual Farmer contacts		
7. Advertisements in Print and other medias		
8. Digital approach – WhatsApp & SMS		
9. Social media – Facebook, YouTube, Instagram etc.		
10. Branding activities at point of purchase or in markets		
11. Farmer engagement campaigns		
12. Demonstrations		
13. Wall paintings		
14. Trade channel trainings		

4.2. The set of discussion was designed around following areas:

- Impact of promotion activities & campaigns – Market Communication Material (MCM), Promotional Campaigns, advertisement etc.
- Impact of influencers – Trade Channels (retail points, commission agents), Company representatives etc.
- Impact of live demonstrations – Field shows, Product Demos etc.
- Brand Ambassador's impact – User farmer's impact

5. Key Insights

Questions	Response of 90% + Respondent Farmers in FGDs	Possible impact
I. Impact of promotion activities & campaigns:		
a. Market Communication Material – Literature, Posters, Banners and other still displays	Not impactful at all for the consumers. He feels, it hardly relates to reality	No impact
b. Farmer’s engagement activities	Creates a buzz in the mind, but not really important for a buying decision	Yes, but need to sharpen it with clear messages about product
c. Jeep campaigns, Video shows or any others	Not Impactful as every company is doing it now a days	No impact, so need to be relooked as spends are high
d. Newspapers advertisement, TV advertisement	They hardly find time to view TV at particular slots or read newspapers	No impact, costly activity, so need to be relooked
II. Impact of influencers:		
a. Testimonial farmer’s advertisement used by various companies	Consumer feels, it is not trustworthy. Farmers, never call these users, despite their contact numbers on advertisement.	Can be impactful if trust creation is focused
b. Point of purchase – Dealer or commission agent	They do not take risk to recommend, as Seed is very sensitive purchase	The impact is on 20% of total purchase
c. Extension Department Officials	They hardly visit regularly	
d. Company representative	Some of them are technically qualified to convince	Need to be trained technically and a regular connect
d. Farmer’s Fairs	Visit is more fruitful for mechanisation knowledge	More visible displays and informative giveaways
III. Impact of live demonstrations:		
a. Field Day/Harvest Day organised by Companies	Not trustworthy, organised on good fields only and stage of crop is not ideal	A major chunk of promotional expense of seed companies happens in this piece trusting that "seeing is believing" in seeds, but consumer is losing trust on these activities, so attention is required.
b. Demonstration plots with brand boards	Not trustworthy as no prior information while sowing	
IV. Brand Ambassadors:		
a. Live demonstration in Village	Yes, will enquire about seed	The most impactful to acquire new set of customers, so need to be extensive.
b. Advise from Friend / Relative	Surely will follow and test the seed	

Author's Compilation

All the farmers shared that they de-risk the crop sowing, by not sowing only one hybrid and not all the hybrids from one company, but normally use seeds of 2 - 3 or more companies. The ratio of usage of different seeds/brands is 50:30:20/10:10. The 1st choice

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among different seeds is, on which, they are completely satisfied (TOM) will occupy 50% space and followed by 30% for 2nd and then will grow one of two other hybrid seeds. This itself gives an indication to marketers, that maximum share for a particular product is capped at 50% or little high in consumer's mind. But farmers can grow two hybrids from one company up to 60% to 70% of their total sown area of cotton crop, if both the seeds are closely strong to each other, but still will use rest from some other company or brand.

The most significant reason for a buying decision is, own experience, followed by advise from a friend or relative, who has used this seed in his field. So important message for marketers is a shift from field days, crop shows & harvest days (which are normally conducted at last stage of maturity of crops), to involve farmers from beginning of crop growth on their demonstration location, so a trust building around brand and variety is build strongly. A crop show or field day conducted on such locations, will have many testimonial farmers to infuse a "Word of Mouth". While in discussions, farmers told that they are attending field days and harvest days of not only one company but more than 2-3 companies, but still restricts himself to decide with personal experience or fellow farmer's advise. On a follow-up question, why they attend a crop show if not interested to believe, the reason they said are to honour the relationship with company representative and some give away/tea-snacks offered by companies.

The next strong influencer is demonstration of particular seed (brand) in his village. Farmers shared that they keep looking at performance of crop in various field of their village right from initial stages, so if find any good-looking field, will go and ask the owner about variety or brand of that seed. So increasing number of demonstrations in major villages, would be ideal approach. Identification of these villages can be done on the basis of basic database like total crop acreages of particular crop, proximity to other adjoining villages, and other parameters. Also these demonstration field should be marked with demo boards (providing name of variety OR brand prominently visible from a sufficient distance). Farmers feel the demo board are fixed in last stage, depending upon the conditions of the field. So fixing demo board immediately after sowing and keeping it till crop lasts, will build confidence about product/brand among consumers.

The third influencer was engagement activities done in pre-sales campaigns. An innovation of linking these engagement activities with key product USPs and if possible, with last year's (sowing season's) Crop Show messages, would be helpful. The routine activities like an AV van, jeeps with product banners etc were observed giving no impact on the

farmers buying decision or even creating a buzz, as almost every company is doing these campaign.

The quality of company representative, in terms of his technical knowledge not only on brand or product but also about general cultivation of crop or of Agriculture can be an added advantage to leave a influential impact on customers to change them to perspective customers. Farmers in discussions shared that many companies are recruiting manpower from local village, keeping in mind a relationship sales through such resources in their command areas, but farmers still spend a quality time with a knowledgeable person to get product knowledge and try his product in his field.

The surprise in this research was penetration of smart phone was very less with the decision makers to buy agricultural inputs within a family. Young kids of farmers were only using smart phone, but they are not the decision makers at home for buying decision. The applications like Facebook and WhatsApp are very popular among these groups but they use these applications for everything other than agriculture. Upon asking reason for this, they shared that companies are sharing more of similar and routine stuff. . Marketers need to pay attention to develop a useful stuff to be shared on Facebook and WhatsApp, as these applications are penetrating in rural areas. FM radio channels are popular among farmers, which they listen, even while working in fields FM being a less costly platform, but surprisingly used by none of the seed companies for their brand promotion.

One of the most important finding in study was also the time of decision making for purchase of seeds for next year. Because Punjab has two crops season i.e. Cotton followed by Wheat crop, so there is an interim time gap of 5-6 months for each of these crops to cultivate again. Farmers shared that after the harvest of their crop, they are more or less clear on decision of atleast two major hybrids (largely the first priority one) to be grown in next year. So this gives an indication that brand awareness and promotional activities during harvesting of crop, are very crucial to influence the purchase decision. Also some innovation in terms of keeping the product brand alive for next six months in farmer's mind would be very critical.

The information through call centers of companies is also negligible at farmer's level. They could recall couple of names of pesticides companies, whose call centers call them to provide various information. Which they say is useful sometimes, to know a new chemical in the market. None of the seed company is found providing information or using this medium for promotional campaigns.

As it came out in discussions, that any gift offering/freebee alongwith seeds purchase has no impact on the farmer to influence his buying for any particular seed. Farmer's don't take risk of enjoying these incentives to pick any new product or brand. They shared that while purchasing pesticides, the freebee is an attraction but not for seeds.

Farmers totally rejected the impact of any display material like banners, posters, wall paintings or hoardings etc to influence their buying decision. Also they shared that retail point or commission agent (the irregular financial channel for the farmers) don't play any role in influencing their buying decision for 80% of total seed requirement. The rest of 20% where farmers wish to try some new seeds is the purchase, where these influencers play a role.

6. Findings and Discussions

Apart from getting information around key objectives of study, also tried to get a feel of farmers on return on investment of cotton crop for a farmer. Over the profitability in cultivation of cotton crop stacks up as below:

Cotton Cost: Benefit Ratio (Own land cultivation)			
Inputs Cost (Per acre, assuming 7 Qtl/acre yield)			
Inputs	Cost per INR Unit	Number of Units	Total Cost (INR*)
Seed	740	3	2220
Pesticides	700	5	3500
DAP Fertiliser	1150	1	1150
Urea Fertiliser	300	2	600
SSP Fertiliser	350	1	350
Potash Fertiliser	300	1	300
Picking (Harvesting Labour)	700	7	4900
Diesel (Fuel)	120	70	8400
Total Input Cost (INR/Acre)			21420
Output Income (INR/Acre)	5000	7	35000
Net Profit (INR/Acre)			13580
Profitability			39%
ROI			63%

Author's Compilation

*INR – Indian Rupee

As per the inputs shared by farmers in study, profitability for own land cultivation of cotton crop for a farmer is better, but if it is a leased land, then he has to shell out additional Rs. 17500/acre (@ Rs. 35000 per year is lease value currently in Punjab), so he has to push

efforts to get per acre yield levels of 10 Quintal per acre to be in profits. Achieving 10 Qtl per acre is possible but lot of efforts and attention on crop cultivation practices are required.

Also it came out in discussions, that labour is becoming a big issue for the farmers, because cotton crop is a labour intensive crop for harvesting because of multiple pickings (due to rejuvenation nature of current Bt Cotton seeds) of crop at interval. This also gives an insight for cotton seed selling companies, to see an opportunity of mechanisation in this crop. But this needs a complete shift of current genetical material being used – for multi pickings of harvesting to one time picking hybrid seeds. This needs a joint approach from a seed provider and mechanisation player. But a possibility of future trends of cotton crop. They also shared that ease of picking of this crop also plays a big role because some of the current hybrids despite giving an additional yield, if not good for picking then the labour will not be easily ready for picking or will charge additional amount from the farmer. So additional income will have challenges of paying extra money and if farmer doesn't get labour on time due to this issue, then chances of losing quality of crop is there.

7. Conclusions, Limitations and Future Scope

From the results, it can be concluded that a saying for seed “Seeing is Believing” is true because farmers trust the seed and buy unless until he sees it in own cultivation. But among other influencers, again the most impactful is user of the seed, his friend or relative. So over all buying decisions are based out of own experience (thus satisfaction) Or an influencer who use it. The activities focused around brand awareness like farmer engagement activities, displays or other promotional activities can enthuse more of brand recall and brand recognition for a popular brand. Brand Ambassadors can play a very important role in influencing buying decision not only for top two brands but also for the lower order of brand usage. Social media approach is increasing in rural area, especially among younger lots, so any creative, interesting and innovative breakthrough in these media will be an added advantage for first mover. Technical skill enhancement for company resources will add more value to create a trust of farmers for the brand. A proper laid out demonstration distribution in targeted markets will help an early awareness and adoption of seeds.

The study has few limitations which gives opportunity to future researchers to fill this gap. The study is conducted only for cotton farmers in a specific geography, while impact of promotional activities may vary for other products like consumer products, white goods or automobile etc. Crop growing conditions differ in some geographies for cotton crop, so there

can be a different insight in a more extensive study. Also the study does not imply to conclude the similar impact of promotional activities for other agricultural inputs like Insecticides, Herbicides, Fungicides and Fertiliser.

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