

SIX MONTHS WITH CORONAVIRUS WHERE THE ECONOMY STANDS NOW

Being caring, accommodative and patient is the need of the hour

Kedar Lele, chairman and CEO of Unilever Bangladesh, tells The Daily Star

It has been six months since the pandemic hit the nation, throwing the economy, life and livelihoods into a crisis. The Daily Star sought feedbacks from business leaders, executives and analysts to help highlight the real situation and realisation of top executives on the ground.

Here are some thoughts of Kedar Lele, chairman, chief executive officer and managing director of Unilever Bangladesh, based on some talking points suggested by the newspaper.

What did we do right?

Bangladesh as a country understood the challenges this pandemic could bring and started to put all the right measures like restricting inbound travellers and quarantining, creating mass awareness, putting a hotline for the nation and creating a coronavirus coordination cell under the highest authority of the country. Bangladesh



Kedar Lele

a few steps like relaxing the restrictions during Ramadan and Eid as well as opening up garment factories. Of course, these were important steps to take care of the overall economy, but the decisions could have been more consistent and well communicated.

Since the beginning of April, we were engaging with the government through private sector platforms under BIDA and UNDP and had proposed zoning protocols in towns as well as safety protocols for industries to follow and continue the production. We had the first-hand experience of doing it as we never stopped our operations even for a single day and continued serving the market demand for much-needed health and hygiene products while keeping our people safe.

We have seen the government taking the decision to impose zoning protocol a few times, unfortunately it could not be implemented as planned and turned out to be ineffective.

What was the impact on businesses and jobs?

From the very beginning, it was clear to us that the Covid-19 issue is a crisis and it will impact everyone – people, community and nation. Of course, we felt the impact from mid-March, and it continued till the end of August. Garment export fell 14 per cent (between July 2019 and April 2020) which was the lowest in 5 years. This impacted multiple industries, for instance the transport sector, banking and fast moving consumer goods. On top of that the flood situation also turned grave.

Covid-19 impacted all parts of our value chain. However, being a multinational we had already set in process identification of alternate sourcing locations as soon as the crisis became visible in China. Once the local lockdown started from mid-March, the country experienced serious congestion across different ports and it did impact availability of raw and packaging material, disrupting our supply lines and implementation plans. However, the team worked hard to ensure our factories continued to function, focusing on the part of our portfolio that we called COVID-Essentials, for instance soaps, detergents and hygiene products. It was a timely realisation that a humble bar of soap was all we had to save ourselves during this crisis until a vaccine arrived.

I am thankful to each employee of our company, who operated from a higher purpose to help the consumers and communities and

worked almost like a soldier of a country to save its citizens.

Though we managed to run the production uninterrupted, reaching the market was not without disruptions. During the month of April, more than 40 per cent of the outlets were either closed or it was not possible to service them for various reasons. A number of our distributors' staff members were also keen to leave for their hometowns and villages during the general leave. We knew in order to protect lives we needed to ensure livelihood, train everyone in the new behavioural protocols and make them play the role of formers of key opinion in their neighbourhood. We ensured there was no job loss, no pay loss or even reduction in any incentive. We did not only commit to protecting our 1,400 core employees but we also took care of around 20,000 people working in our ecosystem.

I must mention the role of government employees and law enforcement agencies who responded to our request and partnered up with businesses, adopting the new ways of working, for instance online approvals, non-physical document processing, relaxing time-limits and then being accessible and eager to help.

What were the responses of businesses and your organisation?

I have mentioned earlier that we knew it is going to be a long-drawn crisis. With more than 80 per cent of the working population being part of informal employment, they faced a stark choice. Behavioural protocols, frequent handwashing, social distancing, covering your face with a mask and boosting

your immunity are critical to reducing the spread of the virus. Early detection and display of symptoms could lead to faster quarantine and contact-tracing to isolate subjects who might have been in touch with the infected person. Quick isolation and aggressive treatment of the symptoms could lead to a substantial reduction in infected cases while also saving thousands of lives.

We exactly followed these principles. Setting up a cadence of morning meetings of the Incident Management Team comprising members from all functions who took stock of health conditions, provided quick solutions, brought in partnerships like Praava Health to organise testing of our employees and helped individuals through supply of medicines and even counselling.

In a nutshell, companywide discipline and dedication helped us maintain our business momentum throughout the last six months of crisis.

What are the strategies you have taken to overcome the crisis and grow?

Our roadmap to manage this crisis was driven by a simple five-pillar model focusing on the workforce (People), protecting supply chain (Supply), adjusting to fluctuating demand (Demand), preserving cash (Liquidity in the organisation) and supporting the larger community with our purpose driven brands (Community).

In the last six months, I along with my management team simply followed these 5 pillars putting people as our first priority. Our philosophy has been if we took care of our people, they would take care of the business. And that came true when we see how we managed to weather the storm.

We have worked with the government and other stakeholders to ensure the supply of our products in the market. Consumers needed our brands to be available and we have ensured that.

We have closely observed demand signals with the emerging situation and planned our business accordingly.

And we have ensured cash to support our business and ensured on-time payment of all our suppliers and vendors along with duty and tax submissions to government exchequer.

Finally, we were one of the first few companies who committed certain investments for the community and help Bangladesh in its fights against Covid-19.

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did not hesitate to put a nationwide restriction from late March and deployed national law enforcement agencies to monitor the movement and encourage social distancing. Soon the government rolled out two stimulus packages, worth over Tk70,000 crore. Most of this support was in the form of loans for industries, the services sector, small and medium enterprises and farmers.

When the Covid-19 crisis struck the country, Team Unilever decided to implement the highest level of behavioural protocols (Tier 3 & 4, while Bangladesh was at Tier 1 & 2) in its manufacturing and sales operations. We trained every employee, provided them with protective equipment, installed handwashing facilities, equipped the locations with sanitisation info and announced work-from-home operations for its office based employees.

We also decided to expand our area of direct

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Behaviour change during Covid-19: Could social marketing do it differently?



NASRIN AKTER and MUHAMMAD ISMAIL HOSSAIN

Human behaviour is complex, dynamic, unpredictable and it has both positive and negative impact on individual, community and environment. In this pandemic, WHO prescribed certain individual behaviour change like washing hands, wearing mask, maintaining health etiquette and keeping social distance to prevent the spread of Covid-19 thereby positively impact the lives of individual, community and environment.

In response to these guidelines, different government wings, corporate houses, non-profit organisations and mass media of Bangladesh undertook different communication campaigns.

However, the campaigns seem to yield little satisfactory impact on changing the behaviour of the masses.

In the context of Bangladesh, adoption of the mentioned behaviours for mass is new and competing with their existing lifestyles. Simply telling people to change, or giving them information and expecting them to act on it, may not work here. Unless, there is a voluntary behaviour change by individual, positive outcome is difficult to achieve.

However, voluntary behaviour change is far more complex and challenging; requires a truly consumer-centred approach to understand why, how and in what context the behaviour is situated. In this backdrop, the knowledge of 'Social Marketing', a discipline that draws on psychology, sociology, economics and anthropology can facilitate the understanding of the underpinning reasons of people's behaviours.

The governments of many countries have been successfully deploying social marketing techniques to achieve diverse strategic social objectives through behaviour change intervention programmes (e.g., smoking cessation, road safety, disease prevention and screening, physical activity and environmental issues).

Social marketing is a systematic process

of influencing behaviour change of different target market segments by utilising a planning process that applies marketing principles and tactics to deliver positive societal benefits. Unlike commercial marketing, the primary objective is not to sell goods and services rather influence the desired behaviour of targeted markets.

Target market behaviour can be influenced in one of the four ways: accept a new behaviour (e.g., wear mask); reject an undesirable behaviour (e.g., expose to crowd); modify a current behaviour (e.g., wash hands frequently) and abandon an old undesirable behaviour (e.g., coughing here and there). It thus appears that, the demand of behaviour change in response to this pandemic is diverse and requires a careful, context specific all-inclusive behaviour change intervention programme.

A carefully designed social marketing programme in this context should accommodate at least five broader aspects: first, a clear definition of the problem at hand; second, a thorough environmental scan to segment the entire market and analyse the target audiences characteristics to influence their behaviours through the right message circulated at the right media and location; third, an analysis of social norms, potential barriers and competitions toward the desired behaviours; fourth, an identification of the opportunities of upstream social marketing to modify the physical environments in which the behaviours are taking place; and fifth, establish the monitoring policies and criteria for evaluating the intervention programme.

Although numerous awareness programmes aiming to bring WHO directed behaviours are in the air from March 2020, little changes are visible in people's behaviour and in many cases, resistance are also evident.

Exchange of people's behaviour with the previous one is based on the concept of WIFM (What's in it for me- tangible/intangible)?

In this case, the core benefit of adopting these new behaviours for mass people is 'Safety', however, different social classes of the society (e.g., upper, middle, working and lower) are not perceiving the benefits of such behavioural adoption equally.

The working and lower class that struggles to balance between life and livelihood may not consider 'safety' as their benefits because they have to sacrifice bigger benefits if they adopt these new behaviours.

As per different predictions, coronavirus



Garment workers are seen washing their hands before their shift at a factory as part of safety measures to contain the spread of Covid-19.

PHOTO: STAR/FILE

outbreak is likely to go on for two years, which is evident if we take into account the second wave of this outbreak in countries that claimed to successfully manage the outbreak.

We are yet to know what is coming for Bangladesh therefore it is high time for the authorities to understand the underpinning attitudes and beliefs hold by the mass people regarding WHO prescribed desired behaviours.

Information on the current status of people's new behavioural acceptance can provide insights on the reasons behind the compliance and non-compliance.

'Coronavirus won't affect the financially disadvantaged people'; 'Youth are less likely to be affected by Covid-19' and 'Third world

countries are immune to many dangerous viruses, including Covid-19' are some of the examples of existing salient beliefs of people which may hold them back in their decision to change existing behaviours.

So, evidence-based knowledge on people's salient beliefs, attitudes, social norms and decision-making autonomy can help the authorities to understand how the existing behaviour is situated within the lives of our masses.

Understanding of the behavioural problem also demanded a clear segmentation of our targeted community to whom we are communicating the message of behaviour change. Geographic (e.g., cities,

neighbourhood), demographic (e.g., age, education, gender) and psychographic (e.g., attitude, beliefs, values, social norms, needs) elements are widely used variables for segmenting markets.

For example, psychographic variables can be used to segment the market into four: 1) Adopters (low information needs, highest commitment to behaviour change), 2) Status Quo (moderate information needs, high commitment to behaviour change), 3) Information seeker (high information needs, moderate commitment to behaviour change) and 4) Sceptics (moderate information needs, lowest commitment to behaviour change).

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