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# Empowering Women through Direct Marketing: A Case of Tupperware

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**ABSTRACT:** India today is at the realm of a paradigm shift in its growth and its position in the world. Both men and women must act decisively to grasp this opportunity. India needs to think big and scale up rapidly in each and every area, be it education, infrastructure, industry, financial services or direct selling by both genders. For around two centuries, social reformers and missionaries in India have endeavored to bring women out of confines in which traditions had kept them. This case is about Tupperware, one of the world's leading direct sellers, supplying premium food storage, preparation and serving items to consumers in more than 100 countries. The case focuses on the role of Tupperware Corporation in the economic empowerment of women. The case highlights the growth of the direct selling company, Tupperware, in the Indian market. It gives a background of Tupperware, its products and its unique selling method, the Party Plan. The case discusses the difficulties faced by Tupperware's into the Indian market and the strategies adopted by it to establish itself in the country. The case stresses on how the company changed its marketing methods to suit the needs of Indian consumers and become one of the leading direct selling companies of India with its 100 percent female sales force.

**KEYWORDS:** Direct Marketing, Tupperware, Employment, Women Empowerment, Income Generation

### I. INTRODUCTION

Though most women in India work and contribute to the economy in one form or another, much of their work is not recognized or documented for in official statistics. Women plow fields and harvest crops while working on farms, women weave and make handicrafts while working in household industries, women sell agricultural products, food and gather wood while working in the informal sector (Anderson, James. 2002). Additionally, women are traditionally responsible for the daily household chores (e.g., cooking, fetching water, washing clothes, and looking after children). Since Indian culture hinders women's access to jobs in stores, factories and the public sector, the informal sector is particularly important for women. There are estimates that over ninety percent of working women are involved in the informal sector<sup>1</sup> such as direct selling. Direct selling enterprises like Tupperware Corporation not only raise their sense of self-worth but provide an excellent business template that offers a meaningful earning opportunity for them. Many millions of people of all nationalities are now enjoying the benefits of this method compared to the traditional way of selling through retail stores. In India, around sixty percent of sales persons are women and around 250-300 product, categories are sold the country through direct selling (Sanker 2007).

Tupperware Corporation and later Tupperware Brands have replicated this model again and again, increasing sales while helping women learn skills, create networks, and share information. Since the early 1990s, there has been rapid expansion into developing countries where women often face steep educational and cultural barriers to employment. Today, in India alone, the company's 100 percent female sales force is more than 50,000 and still growing. Recognizing the opportunity, hundreds of Indian women saw an opportunity in the Tupperware and transformed themselves into a successful businesswoman.



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## II. ABOUT TUPPERWARE CORPORATION

Tupperware Brands Corporation, formerly known as Tupperware Corporation, is a multinational direct marketing company. It is based in Orlando, Florida and started operations in 1946. In partnership with Sales Consultants worldwide, Tupperware reaches consumers through informative and entertaining home parties, special customer contact programs in malls and retail environment and other convenient venues. Tupperware Brands is a family of eight leading brands including Nutrimetics, AvroyShlain, BeautiControl, Nutrimetics, NUVO, Fuller Cosmetics, NaturCare and Swissgarde. The Company offers rewarding business opportunities to all women with a dream and desire to become successful while working from home.

Today, tupperware is one of world's leading direct selling companies with the largest women network, marketing premium food storage, preparation and serving items. Tupperware started its operations in India in 1996 and is a household name today. This success can be attributed to the high-quality products with lifetime warranty and the rewarding business opportunities provided by the Company<sup>2</sup>. Tupperware has all-women network of 40000 sales force and 80 Distributors. Every year the number of these women are recognized and rewarded for their significant achievements in selling these world class products.

Tupperware aims at enriching the lifestyles of its consumers. The entire Tupperware range of products provides a one-stop solution for all food storage, food preparation, microwave, lunch 'n' outdoors, refrigerator and serving requirements as well as a special range for Kids. Tupperware products are made from 100% food grade virgin plastic, they are stylish and elegant, light-weight, non-toxic, and odour-less and come in beautiful soothing colours which can compliment and brighten up every Indian home and kitchen. The USP of Tupperware product lies in its special airtight and liquid tight seals, which lock in freshness and flavor.

## III. TUPPERWARE IN INDIA

Tupperware entered India in November 1996 and started its operations from New Delhi with a focus on kitchenware and plastic products useful in three areas – food storage, food serving, and food preparation. In the first year of its inception in India, it appointed 15 distributors by directly recruiting candidates and training them, through a specially designed 14-week training program in Delhi and Mumbai. Today Tupperware India sells around 200 products and it is reported that the firm has invested over USD 45 million here so far.

The company has a plant at Dehradun, where it makes products for the domestic market. Considering the orthodox Indian culture, company had to sell both the direct selling concept and its party plan (Badenhausen 1996). It was not easy for the company to convince Indian women to come out of Indian houses and sell something in so called man dominated society. In spite of traditional gender role expectations and attitudes, Indian women came up a big way. Today, Tupperware is present in 59 cities across India. The company, however, does not disclose its revenues from the India operations<sup>3</sup>. Tupperware plans to foray into the rural market within the next two-three years although its immediate focus is to increase urban penetration. Though brand awareness of Tupperware in major metros like Delhi and Mumbai is around 80 per cent, however, when it comes to actual product usage it is very low less than one third of brand awareness.

As part of the plan to appeal the Indians, the company is currently focusing on water and dry storage categories. It has recently introduced its water storage range, which is designed for refrigerator use. Besides, the company also recently tied up with Big Bazaar for its promotional activities and as part of its effort to establish access points for customers.

According to financial report 2009, Tupperware India performed better than most of the other foreign direct selling companies in India. Analysts believe this was because it was focused on achieving its targets both in terms of sales as well as segments. The company was growth driven and pushed the direct selling method well. Tupperware India aimed at becoming the No 1 direct selling company in India, by 2015.



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## IV. THE TUPPERWARE MODEL: OF WOMEN, BY WOMEN AND FOR THE WOMEN

Tupperware, though a direct selling company adopted a three-tier network structure which made operations easier for the company. Today, three-tier network structure is one of the fastest growing methods of sales in the world. Millions of people of all nationalities are now enjoying the benefits of this method compared to the traditional way of selling through retail stores. This method of selling offers advantages for both the customers as well as people looking for an earning opportunity. In direct selling whether one wants to work part time or take this opportunity as a full-time career is entirely up to the individual (Susan 2010). Either ways, one can decide one's working hours and one can remain one's own boss. Across the globe, the range of the products being sold through direct selling is growing manifold. According to SrinivasKrishanan (2003) twenty nine per cent of industry's revenue came from home care products and 25 per cent from cosmetics sold by different direct selling enterprises.

Biggart (1989) provides one of the rare academic analyses of Tupperware, discussing how it works as a network direct-selling organization. Most typically, Tupperware is sold directly to the consumer, rather than to stores that then do the work of retailing. There are nested pyramids of dealers and distributors. The distributors are actually independent contractors who buy the product wholesale from the company and make a commission. They also earn a commission on the sales of dealers they recruit, providing an incentive to expand the sales force. This system allows Tupperware to avoid directly employing people and thus paying them benefits. Few selling costs are borne by the company. The sellers buy their own demonstration kits. The hostesses provide the location of the party and further subsidize sales by providing food. The hostesses, of course, also provide the customers<sup>4</sup>.

Contrary to sole contractual relationship, Tupperware depends on social bonding. The association between the distributor and the dealers is close. There are weekly, fortnightly, monthly meetings, emphasizing the successes the dealers have had (Saskatchewan, 1993). It has been argued that home party sales organizations use techniques similar to those of religious revivals to help control their independent sales force (Peven, 1968). In the United States, the weekly meetings are ritualized with singing the Tupperware song (Wedemeyer, 1975: 84); however, this practice is not common in India, China and Canada (Saskatchewan 1993).

Clarke (1999) argues that the organization and ethos of the company can be seen as feminist, in that they are supportive of women. Biggart (1989) agrees that it provides for upward mobility, allows women to organize their time around other obligations' and has a nurturing, rather than a competitive, bureaucratic structure (Rapping, 1980). Tupperware helps women in their domestic budget in two ways: by helping to keep food fresh so that less is wasted, and by constituting a possible source of income thus solving both financial and personal identity woes (Seccombe 1986).

In short, Tupperware's women network today sells products for the kitchen and home, as well as for beauty and personal care, in nearly 100 countries. The company relies on sales consultants – mainly women – to sell wares directly to consumers through a "party plan" approach. The consultants arrange social parties at their homes, or in the homes of willing customers, where in addition to games and entertainment they demonstrate and sell the company's products. Consultants are paid through commission on their sales: they are independent business women and not Tupperware Brands employees. Party hostesses are rewarded with gifts from the consultants. Meanwhile, guests enjoy an opportunity to network with other women and possibly buy items of interest, without having to go to a store.

Tupperware basically depends on women's sociability for its sales strategy, as it revolves around a specific domestic construction of women in its marketing. Product, party, and people are the three core anchors around which Tupperware's brand building and sales are built. In India, Tupperware design teams have noted chefs on board. The design teams create products suitable for Indian Kitchen e.g. masala containers and Multi-cook that can be used for cooking, steaming, straining, reheating as well as serving. Having established its brand Tupperware is now looking at additional distributional channels such as shopping malls.

Health is an important key issue that Tupperware Brands addresses via product demonstrations, company meetings, and literature. In India, where the company's positioning message is "Wealth of Wellness," the teams are able to focus



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on many hygiene and nutrition matters, from water purification, to healthy microwave cooking and children's diet issues. Consequently, Indian women have become de facto health and nutrition consultants sharing a powerful message that helps families live better.

As consumers, women have been enculturated to pay attention to style and price. Tupperware is careful to present itself as stylish, as well as effective. Tupperware products carried a life time guarantee. Any damaged product (cracks or breaks) could be replaced by same/similar new Tupperware product from any place in the world. The company is proud to note that its products have been on display at museums such as New York's Museum of Modern Art (Tupperware, 1998). It is a "consumer" product in that marketing strategies encourage buyers to get the trendy colour or item that is in this catalogue, but may not be in the next. Clarke (1999) describes how the notion of women as consumers of modernism dovetailed with Tupperware's marketing strategies.

Though the Tupperware story is a tradition in the U.S., the model continues to replicate and adapt with success, particularly in developing countries. Though most of the company revenue (85%) comes from outside the U.S., nearly 50 percent comes from emerging markets, including India, Argentina, Russia, Egypt, Turkey, Indonesia, and South Africa. In India alone, with the 100 percent female sales force the company's sales growth in local currency grew by 45 percent in the year ending 2009.

## V. WOMEN PAST AND PRESENT: CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL IMPACT

Tupperware Corporation has replicated its business network model again and again, empowering women while helping women learn selling skills, create networks, and share information to help their relatives, known and society. Since the early 1990s, in particular, there has been speedy expansion into developing countries like India where women often face steep educational and cultural barriers to employment. Company officials admit that when they first started out in 1996, there were both ideological resistance and practical obstacles to women's taking work outside the home. The lack of commodified services available to replace their domestic work meant women had to super exploit themselves or rely on informal arrangements with family and friends.

The emergence of Tupperware on the Indian market created a new kind of opportunity to an entirely underrepresented labor demographic; women, and especially suburban housewives, which subsequently facilitated the calls for equal rights between men and women in the workplace. Tupperware created a "Chain of Confidence" through which women selling the company's products bond together in friendship and help each other "feel confident about themselves and in their ability to succeed." The chain of confidence is a campaign which reflects Tupperware's commitment towards making a difference and changing one life every week through enlightening, educating and empowering women across various walks of life. The campaign provides an opportunity to young girls and women all across the globe. It creates means for the housewife to maintain her obligations in the domestic sphere of the household while creating an independence from the home in a sociable atmosphere.

History reveals that despite the difficulties, women's participation in the work force drastically increased. Women came out of their homes and started selling products to women through their homes or friendship networks without having conflict with their homemaker role (Frankenberg 1997). They could make money; they could become part of a business operation. The impact on women extends beyond the improved circumstances and confidence of the sales consultants. A critical part of the "meaningful earning opportunity" that Tupperware Brands promotes is basic networking and information-sharing among women. This not only supports product sales but also gets to the heart of home and family matters. There is an obvious societal change that we are engineering to empower women to become confident – by offering them financial independence, self esteem, exposure, and a secure future for them and their families.

When Tupperware entered to India, company expected it would be limited to the upper class with surplus incomes. But contrary to expectations it has penetrated the small towns and built a base among the middle and lower middle class as well. This may have something to do with its mission of empowering women and the sense of release that its sales force experiences. In India, full-time consultants can earn at least as much as a teacher or nurse. Some are really quite well off while most of others prefer to work part-time. Each woman has the opportunity to attain "manager" status, with increased commission levels and an expectation that they will recruit, train, and motivate a new team.



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## VI. LESSONS LEARNED

Direct selling is one of the fastest growing methods of sales in the business world. Not only the developed countries but developing and third world countries are also enjoying the benefits of this method as compared to any other method of direct selling including retail. Tupperware's contribution is not an exception to this. The name "Tupperware" today is synonymous in many languages with the idea of convenient, durable, sealable, plastic food container.

Tupperware is driving positive changes in women's lives through its business strategies and philanthropic programs. Tupperware business is aligning to enlighten, educate, and empower women and girls. Offering educational opportunities and building confident and accomplished young women are social investments that guarantee powerful returns for generations to come, and build a legacy of caring for tomorrow's next generation's children.

Tupperware Corporation has modified with the times and country specific requirements. Like in India, it has to take the support of media (both print and electronic) for reaching to masses. Consequently, in many countries, consultants are now similar to franchisees, with their own websites, shopping mall kiosks, and creative event planning businesses. Online training from "Tupperware University" is also available to them, offering information and tips in many of areas of interest, such as food safety, environmental issues and sustainable living, community involvement, health and nutrition, and of course, business tips and management techniques.

The most important lesson over past few years is that women's economic empowerment is a core brand element that is, and always will be, good for the business. It is a differentiating factor for Tupperware Brands in both developed and developing markets. It is also a flexible concept that can adjust to different cultural situations given the localized nature of the company's business model and corporate management (World Bank 2009).

Listening to and paying due attention to local teams is an important lesson. Women not only remain its major sales force but the consumers of the company's products too. The company did not face any major competition from other plastic wares in India, as the quality of Tupperware goods was much better. However, Tupperware India faced intense competition from manufacturers of steel containers as Indian consumers used steel containers to store and carry food.

Lastly, the company has learned that its very business model and the fact of women's interest in their own communities mean that corporate social responsibility and community engagement cannot be an afterthought. They are an integral part of Tupperware Brands' motivational strategy for consultants and consumers alike.

## VII. DISCUSSION

Tupperware's success seems to be more than a reflection of current fashion, though; its ideological and strategic liminality between home and work must also be a factor. In this view, rather than being a liability, the company's continued insistence on domestic femininity is key to its financial resilience (Leonardo, 1987). While once this image might have constituted a non-threatening first step into the business world, now it can provide working women with a step back into the family. As long as women continue to be responsible for the domestic sphere at the same time as they need to engage in income earning, Tupperware's fusion of the two will have practical and ideological salience. While Clarke (1999) suggests that Tupperware has been used by women as a cash generator, solving their economic problems while giving the domestic sphere value. Therefore, In spite of traditional gender role exceptions and attitudes, Indian women are coming up in a big way.

Tupperware which has ideally been a household word for generations, today has become an integral part of the classic suburban lifestyle in the most of the urban parts of the world. Enabling women to help themselves through direct selling enterprises raises their sense of self-worth and has social, economic and community benefits. One is that the expertise and experience are usually perpetuated and passed on to others making them successful as well.

Strategic alliances with Proctor & Gamble, Whirlpool, and the International Chef's Forum enabled Tupperware to promote the brand and spark interest in products. Tupperware was gaining fast recognition in the Indian market. Its 'Party Plan' worked well because it fitted in the urban and semi urban culture of 'kitty party'. By August 2010, the company expanded its operations in 22 states in the country. Except steel manufacturers, company as such didn't face





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any direct competition from plastic wares in India. Company's product range and after sales service is satisfactory and reasonable.

## VIII. CONCLUSION

In India, the women's economic empowerment process has begun and witnessing a steady improvement in the enrolment of women in all spheres of life including business. Their economic independence is better as compared to earlier decades. Involvement of women in direct selling enterprises like Tupperware has been on the rise. In the modern scenario with rising aspirations of people and increasing prices, it's a good career opportunities for women as compared to other jobs. Though a direct selling company, differed from other direct selling companies offers advantages for both the customers as well as housewives looking for an earning opportunity.

The role played by Tupperware brands for the women's economic empowerment is significant and presents win-win scenario for the business, women, and community as a whole. Indeed, that is Tupperware's direct selling success story and undoubtedly good for business, women and development everywhere.

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