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How Bharat is changing the mechanics of brand building

Bharat is making visible something marketers everywhere need to understand: brands are built through cumulative consumer experiences, not channels or funnels.

by Sushree Panda | 15/09/2026



AI-generated

A customer may discover a brand and compare options digitally. The final decision, however, may still come after speaking to a representative or hearing from someone they trust, like their local kirana store owner.

India's next wave of consumers isn't waiting to come online. They are already there.

The IMAI-Kantar Internet in India 2025 report, released earlier this year, puts India at 958 million active internet users, with rural India accounting for 57% of them. Consumers outside the metros are discovering brands through Instagram, Facebook and YouTube, watching short-form videos and listening to podcasts. They are also using AI tools to research products and compare prices.

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That should, in theory, have made the marketer's job simpler. Put the brand where the consumer is, build enough reach, follow the digital trail and optimise what converts.

Except the consumer journey doesn't behave quite that neatly. The same person who discovers a brand through a Reel may search for it on Google, compare options online, speak to a salesperson and then check with a neighbour, retailer or another customer before deciding.

In that journey, where exactly is the marketing funnel?

The Bharat consumer doesn't follow one funnel

Marketers tend to treat Bharat like a logistics puzzle, or a language puzzle. Reach enough pin codes. Translate the campaign into enough languages. Add regional media. Job done.

But Bharat isn't simply Tier 2, Tier 3 and rural India waiting to behave like metros once digital penetration catches up.

Take the kind of purchases where the stakes are real: a loan, choosing a school, buying insurance or a piece of farm equipment. Nobody does that on a whim. A customer may discover a brand and compare options digitally. The final decision, however, may still come after speaking to a representative or hearing from someone they trust.

We see this in our own loan journey. When a customer expresses interest digitally, our customer experience team asks how they would prefer to proceed. Some are comfortable continuing digitally. Others would rather have a relationship manager visit them. We accommodate both.

These are not necessarily two different kinds of customers, a "digital customer" and an "offline customer". The same person moves between digital and human interactions depending on what they need at that moment.

When discovery and decision need not happen in the same place, it creates a problem for marketers because our systems are much better at measuring the former.

Trust is more than familiarity

When the stakes are high, the questions people ask are remarkably basic: Can I actually count on this? Has someone I know used it? If I need help later, will someone actually pick up the phone?

But even trust is not one thing.

Advertising can create **brand trust**: familiarity and recognition. Product information, pricing and evidence can create **product trust**: confidence that what is being offered will actually solve the problem. Then there is **institutional trust**: the belief that the organisation will still be there when something goes wrong.

That last layer is often built in places a media plan cannot fully control. A salesperson who explains

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I think about this every time our team sits across from a school owner deciding whether to trust us with their institution's future. They may have seen our communication or responded to a campaign. But for a decision that affects a school built over years, familiarity alone is rarely enough.

The touchpoints we measure may not be the ones that matter

A retailer's recommendation. A teacher's opinion. Another school owner's experience. A neighbour saying they have used the product. None of these fits neatly into an attribution dashboard.

Yet in many communities, trust travels through conversations long before it appears in analytics dashboards.

That doesn't mean word of mouth always beats paid media. They do different jobs. Advertising creates discoverability and familiarity. Search helps people investigate. A salesperson explains the proposition. Existing customers and local networks can reduce the perceived risk of acting on it.

In many high-consideration categories, word of mouth isn't simply a happy side effect of marketing. It is part of the conversion architecture.

A customer may encounter a brand when they have no immediate requirement. Months later, when the need arises, they remember it and return. That is where brand salience matters. What attribution sees as a new opportunity may, from the customer's perspective, be a journey that started months earlier.

The deeper the journey moves into human interactions, the less complete the digital trail becomes. If marketers optimise only for what they can measure cleanly, they risk undervaluing the interactions that made the eventual decision possible.

Forget the funnel, watch the journey

Translating an English campaign into Hindi, Tamil or Kannada is useful. But it doesn't automatically make the communication local.

The real work is figuring out what actually drives a decision. How families make choices together, what a community expects, what people aspire to, what their day actually looks like. Sometimes it is the setting in the visual. Sometimes it is who is shown making the decision. Sometimes it is a testimonial from somebody who sounds and feels familiar.

The question worth asking isn't whether people will understand the ad. It's whether they will feel understood by it. The challenge is doing this at national scale without creating an impossible number of campaigns.

Brands need a national spine: a consistent promise, proposition, identity and set of values, with

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community voices can change. Consistency should lie in what the brand stands for, not necessarily in every word it says.

For years, marketers learned to optimise for what consumers type into a search box.

“School loan.”

“School construction loan.”

“Loan for school building.”

Search taught us to communicate with machines in keywords. But consumers increasingly don't have to. Our own search data offers an interesting glimpse into this shift. Conventional keyword-led searches still dominate school-loan-related discovery, but we are beginning to see more natural, conversational queries.

“School *kholne ke liye* loan *kaise milega?*” [How to get a loan to open a school?]

“School ke liye loan kaise milega?” [How to get a loan for a school?]

“How to get a loan for school?”

The consumer is no longer simply naming a product. They are describing a problem and asking for an answer.

The broader search behaviour tells us something similar. People search for school construction, new classrooms, infrastructure, expansion and renovation. The financial product is often the means to an outcome, rather than the starting point in the customer's mind.

That becomes more important as voice interfaces and conversational AI become part of discovery. A school owner does not necessarily need to work out that the product category they should search for is “education infrastructure finance”. They can simply say: I run a school. I want to build four more classrooms. What financing options do I have?

The machine does the translation from need to category.

There is a language dimension to this too. The language consumers use for a specific product search may not necessarily be the language in which they prefer to discover, engage with or respond to a brand.

Conversational interfaces could blur that distinction further by allowing people to describe what they need naturally, rather than translating that need into the terminology, language and keyword structure a search engine expects.

And AI-led discovery changes something else. Consumers can ask a system not merely to find brands, but to recommend and compare them. That puts a new intermediary between brand and

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For marketers, the question no longer is **campaign** or not, but when a machine is asked which brands deserve consideration, what will it say about us?

Looking beyond reach

All of this forces us to reconsider one of marketing's most familiar words: reach.

~~We usually understand reach as exposure. How many people saw the campaign? How many markets did we cover? How many impressions did we generate? Those measures still matter. But they tell us how far the media travelled, not necessarily how far the influence travelled.~~

This changes the brief for marketers and agencies too. If reach is measured primarily through impressions, clicks and attributable conversions, we risk optimising for the parts of the journey that are easiest to see. The harder task is designing for how influence travels across paid media, content, earned visibility, sales interactions, customer experience and other people.

Bharat is making visible something marketers everywhere need to understand: consumers do not experience brands in channels, funnels or attribution models. They experience them through interactions that accumulate over time, across platforms, conversations and people.

The brands that win in Bharat won't necessarily be the ones with the biggest budgets or widest media reach. They will be the ones that understand how influence travels: from an ad to a search, from useful content to a webinar, from an AI recommendation to a salesperson, and from another customer's experience to the confidence to act.



- Sushree Panda, senior vice-president and head - marketing and communications, Varthana.

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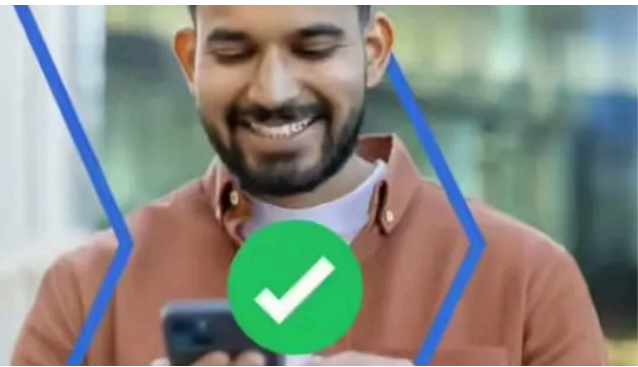
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