

Approaches to Market Traditional Ayurvedic Products in Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT: *Ayurvedic industry is one of the oldest industries in the world. As an ancient country, Sri Lanka also has more than three thousand years of history in Ayurveda medical system and products. Even though a country has significant inherent ownership of Ayurveda, still is not much popular as Western medicine. With the Covid 19' pandemic, people tend to use Ayurveda products than early. The absence of a more sustainable and effective marketing strategy has declined the demand for ayurvedic products. This paper has emphasized the possible approach for marketing traditional ayurvedic products in Sri Lanka.*

In this study, the researcher has collected data through the qualitative method, using in-depth semi-structured interviews based on a single case study approach. In this paper, the researcher has found three main themes to market traditional ayurvedic products, highlighting product attributes and features, utilizing professional proficiency, and Process related marketing.

KEY WORDS: *Traditional ayurvedic products, Marketing strategies, Sri Lanka*

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I. INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The traditional Ayurvedic industry is one of the ancient industries in the world. Basically, the Ayurvedic industry and treatments came from India and it continues in Nepal, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Myanmar. Further, Asian countries including Sri Lanka have more than three thousand histories of traditional ayurvedic items and their treatment approaches (Perera, 2019). According to the World Health Organization (WHO), traditional medicine is defined as a combination of health practices and approaches, knowledge, and beliefs integrated with plants, animals, and mineral-based medicines for spiritual therapies, manual techniques, and exercises applied in combination for treatments, diagnose and prevent illnesses or maintain the well-being of people. Further, the school of Ayurveda has emphasized the meaning of Ayurveda on their official website in 2020, as a combination of two words Ayu means "life" and Veda means "knowledge". The Sanskrit meaning of the word Ayurveda is Science or Knowledge of Life.

As a country that is basically combined with traditional and cultural practices, Sri Lanka is rich in its inherent remedies for major illnesses. Apart from that, they have further emphasized that, from its independence, Sri Lanka has been able to maintain a higher level of quality in its medical treatment including western as well as ayurvedic medicines. Arachchi and Kaluarachchi in 2019, have reinforced the idea mentioned by the Perera in 2019, as Sri Lanka is a recognized country for Ayurveda medicine and treatment with its inherent traditional background and availability of plenty of natural herbs. Even though the present majority of people in Sri Lanka seek more traditional medicine at the time of illness, the information or statistics is inadequate to substantiate the majority of Ayurveda medicine because lacking reporting of formal practice to maintain records of patients in traditional medicine unlike in western medicine (Abeyratne, 2019). Therefore, people are hesitant to get support for ayurvedic medicine, and sometimes, they are criticizing the use of Ayurveda products to cure minor illnesses.

At the time of Covid 19' people tend to use many more ayurvedic medicines to enhance their immunity or immunity boosters and they used them to minimize the risk of infecting Covid 19'. Even though they have used or consumed those products, they are not revealing it with others, since others are criticizing the use of traditional remedies to cure minor illnesses. Kaur et.al., 2019 mentioned that the usage of ayurvedic products has increased during a pandemic. Further, as a country who are growing with tradition and beliefs, most of the time Sri Lankans are using home remedies for minimizing the impact of minor illness as well as protect and maintain beauty.

Even though the country is having an ancient relationship with Ayurveda medicine and Ayurveda products, Sri Lanka is lacking in the promotion of Ayurvedic medicine and its practices by incorporating modern marketing practices to cater to its target audience who has extraordinary expectations in the modern marketplace requirements. They have just used their unattractive packaging and marketing practices and it has degraded the value of the inherent practices of Ayurveda. Gupta in 2020 has emphasized that empowering

small and medium entrepreneurs who are engaged with Ayurvedic production has achieved rapid market growth and has led to economic growth in the country as well. Therefore, exploring the way to promote Ayurveda products is essential in the Sri Lankan context. It can be really beneficial for uplifting the Sri Lankan economy by minimizing poverty and the economic crisis of the country.

When it comes to marketing Ayurveda products, they need to capture a sufficient market by highlighting the unique quality of traditional Ayurveda products with the application of modern marketing strategies. In that case, they need to consider storing, packaging as well as efficient and effective customer services with the use of creative and friendly staff support of the ayurvedic medical centers and the shoppers who are selling those products.

When it comes to the different factors or aspects considering the marketing strategy for traditional Ayurveda products, Kaur et.al., 2019 have emphasized that the efficiency of the ayurvedic product should be reflected by its packaging as well as emphasized the several certifications for verifying the quality of the products. Apart from that, they highlighted, that moderate pricing is having a significant impact on the purchase intention of Ayurvedic products. Apart from that, free from chemicals, and side effects, detailed information written on the packaging are the other main factors that consumers are considering when they are buying ayurvedic products. Sen and Chakraborty (2020) have emphasized that traditional ayurvedic products have a higher chance of globalized their products and it has provided vast benefits for the parties who are engaged with manufacturing and selling ayurvedic products.

Accordingly, this study has investigated that, how to market ayurvedic products in Sri Lanka by using the single case study approach in qualitative research. In summary, the 1.1 section has mentioned the significance of the study with elaborating on the main highlights of the literature review. Section 1.2 of the paper mentioned the objective of the study and the 1.3 section is elaborating on the methodology of the research used by the researcher to explore marketing practices for ayurvedic products in the Sri Lankan context. The final section has emphasized the interpretations of the findings with the conclusion in section 1.4.

1.2 Research Objectives

The primary objective of the study is to explore the possible effective marketing practices for traditional Ayurveda products in Sri Lanka with the selected ayurvedic organization.

1.3 Research Methodology and data analysis

This study has used the subjective view regarding marketing strategy for Sri Lankan Ayurvedic products from an ontological stance. Accordingly, the researcher believes that the data to be collected and the interpretations given by the respondents are depending on their behavioral and personal characteristics. The researcher has developed and always maintained a close relationship with their target respondents to collect subjective data from an epistemological ground (Creswell, 2013).

The qualitative nature of the study led to utilize the case study as the research design. The single case study approach has been chosen since this organization has a significant amount of experience in selling ayurvedic products coupled with several ayurvedic medical services. The organization selected for this study is named Beta Company for confidentiality reasons it is the most prominent ayurvedic center in Sri Lanka and its headquarters is located in Kandy District in Sri Lanka. Currently, it has nearly 70 dedicated employees in its Ayurveda medicine manufacturing center and its sales and distribution unit.

The researcher has collected the data through in-depth semi-structured interviews with spending a significant amount of time within and outside the organization to ensure the quality of the data. Further, the researcher observed respondents while conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews. Moreover, all the interviews were audio-recorded, and field detailed notes were taken including the memoing of respondents' feelings and emotions as well as their reactions to the interview questions that are reflecting on the context of the study. The judgmental and convenient sampling method was used (Neuman, 2006) in selecting the respondents for conducting this study.

When analyzing the qualitative data of the study, the researcher has used the generic strategy as followed. In the first step of qualitative data analysis, the researcher utilized the adoption of the data reduction approach the interview transcripts were coded by identifying the significant information relevant to the research question. Second, in the sorting stage of the analysis, and then codes were grouped into several categories based on the similarities and relationships of the codes. Third, themes were constructed from the categories to address the research question by verifying the quality of original data without losing the meaning of the data that are collected from the respondents.

1.4 Finding and Interpretation

After the analysis of the collected qualitative data through in-depth interviews, the researcher has generated three main themes which have shown in figure 01.

Table 1: Themes related to the marketing strategies for Sri Lankan Ayurvedic products

Highlighting product attributes and features	Utilizing professional proficiency	Process related marketing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highlighting the quality of the product • Incorporating innovative packaging • Enhancing availability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhancing knowledge of employees • Highlighting the vast experience of the workforce 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highlighting the uniqueness of products • Incorporating with other related industries

Source: compiled by the researcher

Each of these themes is explained below with the relevant evidence as follows.

Theme 01: Highlighting product attributes and features

When it comes to the marketing approach for traditional ayurvedic products in Sri Lanka, highlighting the product attributes and features is having a significant impact on the purchase intention of the customer. Even traditional products need to highlight the product attributes such as quality, features, and benefits as well as the attractive and innovative packaging of traditional ayurvedic products. Apart from that, they need to enhance the availability of the product through a strong and efficient, well-managed system of supply that connects all stakeholders in the production and value creation process. Beta company has utilized strong and attractive product attributes with significant packaging to attract their customers to their products. Respondent A who is attached to the Beta company has elaborated on the above idea as follows.

“Most of the time, as Sri Lankan, we are not keen on highlighting the quality of the product in our own creations and production. I don’t know, why we are not focusing on that. But it is one of the significant points we need to consider. Most of the villagers are selling ayurvedic products in the pedestrian zones. It has damaged the value of the product. Even a village needs to know how to sell what to sell and where to sell. Another important point is most of our ayurvedic products are in a kind of unique smell and the majority of customers don’t like that smell. My personal belief is we need to change that hard smell to a more attractive smell while protecting the quality of the product”

According to the above idea, the respondent has highly disappointed in selling Ayurveda products and ingredients in pedestrian zones. The above idea has emphasized that the selling place and the mechanism used for selling has important factors when marketing traditional ayurvedic products. Further, the respondent has emphasized the new view of processing the product by touching customer sensors with good smell and appropriate forms of ayurvedic products.

The above idea has been reinforced by the respondent who is an employee of the Beta company.

“The very traditional boutiques are not enough to sell our products. Even we are having more humanistic approaches such as game wedamahattaya (the ayurvedic doctor who is doing treatments from his experience and family background) and their traditional medicine and treatment without charging any single rupee, now all things are changing and customers tend to judge the quality of products through external factors such as packaging and all. So, we need to convert our traditional ayurvedic system with modern face marketing while ensuring the backbone of ayurvedic products and the inherent beliefs of our process.”

The above respondent’s idea has emphasized that even if the traditional industry is having a significant value they need to market their products by considering the modern marketplace requirements. In that case, the respondent has highlighted the need of adding economic value and it is one of the major points they are degrading their own ayurvedic service and the product value. Modern customers are more focusing on the quality of the product with modern parameters.

The employee of the Beta company has elaborated his idea on marketing strategies to promote traditional ayurvedic products as follows.

“Since I am working with qualified and prominent ayurvedic product selling and service providing center, I always like to emphasize the value of quality in different avenues, first thing is, we always know that most of the ayurvedic product sellers are not focusing on packaging and they just sell their product in a polythene cover. Then the customer cannot identify the ingredients, manufacturing, and expiring dates of the product. Other than that, have you ever seen the Weston medicines selling in pedestrian zones even Panadol? No... they are properly positioning their products. Most of the time, our Sinhala Beheth Shala is very gloomy and dark as well as the employees are not much active. I think we need to change it to gain better value from our own product”.

This idea has properly mentioned the most important pillars of developing the ayurvedic product with an innovative face from the ingredients to the people that the organization needs to recruit as their employees. In that case, people or stakeholders who are connected with ayurvedic products, need to position their product in a proper manner and they need to consider every aspect of the product. Customers always focus on that information and they need to provide those things in a proper manner.

The employee who is working with the supply system of the Beta company has elaborated on the importance of availability and the atmosphere in selling and marketing ayurvedic products as follows.

“When I consider my personal idea for selling and marketing ayurvedic products, I personally believe that inside and outside appearance of the store also has a significant impact on selling the product as other products and services we are buying and selling. Therefore, rebuilding the store's appearance is also important. Other than that, most of the time we are experiencing a lack of storage for some products such as climate-controlled facilities. since we are not suitably maintaining suppliers. I think even though our products remain of high quality, lack of availability leads to customer dissatisfaction. Another thing is within the higher damage to the natural environment also created a higher disadvantage for this industry by enhancing the shortage of ayurvedic products with lacking resources such as natural plants and so on”.

The above idea has emphasized the importance of maintaining strong supply chain management with the rural suppliers for a continuous supply of quality raw medicines and other ayurvedic products. Further, he has highlighted, the need for a sustainable supply chain with continuous maintenance of plantations which are having ayurvedic value. Apart from that, he has highlighted the need for an attractive, modern-looking store atmosphere to sell and market ayurvedic products in the Sri Lankan context.

Theme 02: Utilizing professional proficiency

Whatever the product or service produced by the organization, they need to utilize human talents. In that case, employees need to maintain their professional proficiency to market ayurvedic products to a modern customer base. The employee's knowledge, skills, and experience are pivotal for creating an excellent brand image and it will enhance the prominence of the product.

The supervisor of Beta company in the human resource section has elaborate that as follows.

“Basically, human is a kind of unique resource as we all know, they have an unbelievable impact on the business even we are selling products. Sometimes, our products are really recognized by the customers with the excellency of the service as an ayurvedic product supplier, but weak employee relationships or unacceptable customer service can tarnish our brand image. Therefore, human talent should be most important in marketing Ayurveda products”.

The supervisor of Beta company, he has strongly believed that the human qualities of the employees can add more value to their traditional ayurvedic products when they are marketing those products.

One of the employees who is working at the counter, he has emphasized that, the importance of maintaining professional proficiency when marketing traditional ayurvedic products and services.

“Normally, we know that all pharmacies who are selling Weston medicines and medical services, all people who are engaging with that, they have professionally accepted qualifications. Sometimes in our traditional ayurvedic system, we are not that much of keen on professional proficiency. But this is the point where customers are rating the service and product quality as well as they are building trust towards our organization as well as our product. Therefore, we always focus on the experience as well as their professional qualification to join this industry. Then we can refresh the value of the ayurvedic system more than ever”.

Accordingly, the ayurvedic system should be reshaped by the university degree holders and other institutes that are creating those professionals. Then the organization can enhance the trustworthiness of the product by emphasizing the knowledge and experiences that are having with their employees.

Theme 03: Process-related marketing

Marketing is not only talking about selling a particular product or service. It is really attached to the process of manufacturing and selling. The following respondents have emphasized the importance of process-related marketing in terms of highlighting the uniqueness of the production process that incorporates scientific evidence, incorporating novelty of promotions and reaching customers as well as connecting with innovative possible industries to increase the popularity of traditional ayurvedic products.

One of the team members of the production section of Beta company has emphasized the importance of proving the benefits and value of the ingredients through scientific approaches as follows.

“We always believe that we are having a long history of using ayurvedic products and the treatments that are highly recommended for some illnesses. Most of the time those treatments are far stronger than Weston treatment since we always give treatment by diagnosing the root cause of the symptoms and all with verifying there is no side effect by using or facing those ayurvedic treatments. But we all are living and playing in a very competitive environment. Especially in business. Therefore, we need to emphasize what is happen when using a scientific approach. Then the trustworthiness of our traditional products can increase in a more sustainable manner. It will not damage our uniqueness. Definitely, it will enhance the uniqueness”.

According to the above respondent, marketers who are engaged with the Ayurveda industry should link their process to scientifically proven approaches. Since the present customers are not willing to accept anything without exploring the process of the product and the post-process result that consuming a particular product or service. Therefore, emphasizing the composition of the product and its effectiveness through lab testing can enhance the trust in the product.

An employee in the selling section of Beta Company has elaborate that highlighting the uniqueness of the product through incorporating new promotional tools also adds a new value to market the traditional ayurvedic product in the country as well as overseas as follows.

Most of our ayurvedic product suppliers are coming from very rural villages and they are using their inherent mechanisms and tactics to produce those products, so we can promote that thing using a storytelling approach. Mmm... other than that, this is just my personal idea, there are so many certifications for these kinds of traditional products, we can try on those things as well. Especially, now the world is running with smart devices, therefore, we need to present in digital form and enhance our market share with foreign countries as well”.

The above respondent has emphasized new modes of promotions that ayurvedic manufacturers can consider. Here, the parties who are engaged with ayurvedic products can consider local and international certificates that are considering the product quality and the production processes. Apart from that, the respondent has suggested a new mode of promotion as a digital storytelling approach which means, the manufacturers can market their products by highlighting the process of manufacturing from rural villages to quality products by emphasizing the transparency of the procedures that they have used.

Further, the manager of the Beta company has mentioned the importance of possible mergers with other relevant industries locally and internationally with mutual understanding with creating a win-win situation. The idea has been elaborated as follows.

“Now we are living in a more complex, competitive world and we cannot survive a single organization. As a country, we are having a large number of resources in terms of natural as well as talents and inherent practices. now Ayurvedic tourism is emerging and we can connect with this and promote it. Other than that, our neighbor country, India is the oldest and the most prominent country for the ayurvedic system. They have more than five thousand years of history for ayurvedic. so, we can take their contribution to uplift our traditional ayurvedic system and it will be beneficial to create a better market for ayurvedic products”.

The respondent has further elaborated on the possible mergers for the ayurvedic industry and their impact on brand visibility and brand recognition of ayurvedic products.

In a conclusion, this study has investigated how the Sri Lankan ayurvedic product market in the country. in that case, the researcher has identified three main themes to market traditional ayurvedic products in Sri Lanka. In that case, though considering product-related factors such as product features, packaging, and store atmosphere. Then the researcher has identified maintaining professional proficiency including knowledge and experience is highlighted. The final theme has related to process-related factors such as uniqueness, the approach of manufacturing, and possible mergers with the tourism industry and international ayurvedic industry highlighted through the rigorous analysis of qualitative data that are collected from the series of in-depth interviews using Beta Company.

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