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Exploring Retailers' Perceptions of Fertilizer Promotions in India: A ZMET Analysis

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Abstract: Business organizations emphasize on the promotional strategies. In order to develop effective promotional strategies, it becomes imperative to deeply understand the conscious, sub-conscious, emotional and perception attributes of the major stakeholders. Present study investigates the perception of retailers towards the promotional strategies of fertilizer companies by employing Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET), a qualitative research method technique. Through employing systematic seven step ZMET process, present study identified 16 key constructs which reflect the underlying feelings and attributes of retailers towards the promotional strategies. The identified constructs were further grouped into six themes namely, Success Stories, Digital and Social Media Marketing, Product Demonstrations and Field Trials, Direct Marketing, Demand Generation Activities, and Customer and Consultancy Services. The present study has important implications on exploring retailer's experiences with promotional activities of the fertilizer companies by highlighting both strength and gaps in current marketing approaches. Further companies can get insight on adopting more targeted promotional strategies to strengthen retailer engagement, building strong relationships and ultimately driving market success.

Keywords: Promotional strategies, business, fertilizer companies, marketing, retailers.

INTRODUCTION

The agribusiness sector is quite dynamic and changing marketing strategies of business organizations indicate fierce competition among the players. Among all, promotional strategies have become an essential component of competitive positioning in the agribusiness sector, particularly in emerging markets like India. Especially the agriculture input sector, fertilizer companies utilize a

range of promotional strategies to target various stakeholders to differentiate their products in a highly competitive market (Al Ubaidiyah et al., 2023). Common promotional activities include outdoor advertising, personal selling, print and television media campaigns, demonstration plots, farmer field visits, distribution of brochures, and wall painting/posters, all aimed at increasing product visibility and retailer engagement (Choudhary,

2014). These approaches help companies reach targeted farmer groups, build brand differentiation, and boost customer loyalty through both traditional and digital channels. Fertilizer companies, competing for brand visibility and customer loyalty, invest significantly in marketing efforts that span both traditional and digital platforms. These campaigns are often aimed not only at end-users, i.e., farmers, but also at retailers who play a pivotal role in product adoption and dissemination. Retailers act as both commercial intermediaries and informal advisors, directly influencing farmers' buying decisions. Despite this strategic importance, the perceptions and emotional responses of retailers to such promotional strategies remain academically underexplored. While most existing literature concentrates on consumer response to agricultural marketing strategies, there is limited understanding of how promotional efforts resonate with retailers themselves. This gap is significant, as retailers serve as critical conduits of trust, information, and product knowledge in rural economies (Achrol & Kotler, 1999). Understanding the retailers' perspectives is vital for measuring promotional effectiveness and also designing more relational, emotionally resonant strategies that reflect the realities of rural markets.

Retailers serve as key stakeholders for the fertilizer companies to channelize their produce further to the farmers. While conventional research tools like surveys and structured interviews have their limitations to capture the deeper, often subconscious, cognitive processes that shape stakeholder attitudes. Due to the heavy footfall of competitors on the retailer's doorstep, their decisions are not driven purely by logical evaluation but are heavily influenced by emotions, mental images and cultural metaphors embedded in their lived experiences. There is significant gap in the literature for underscoring the inner attributes, perceptions and emotional understanding of the retailers for promotional campaigns of the marketers.

Existing literature has outcome related to overall feedback, business growth rather than understanding deep emotional attributes influencing buying behaviours through the promotional activities. Keeping the same in view point, present study has adopted the use of Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET) which is developed by Zaltman (1997). This technique offers a metaphor-based storytelling and image elicitation to access hidden perceptions and reveal how individuals interpret complex ideas, such as brand trust or promotional intent (Christensen & Olson, 2002).

Studies have also shown that ZMET helps to explore the symbolic meanings and deeper associations of customers with concerned brands (Coulter et al.,

2001). With the large number of competitors in space of agri-input marketing where the perceived value of a product is closely tied to relational dynamics and emotional trust, the use of aforesaid technique becomes more relevant. Present study is one of its kind to use ZMET technique for understanding retailers' perception on the effectiveness of promotional strategies of fertilizer companies in the context of agri-input sector.

The understanding of agri-input retailers on various brands underlies with tangible factors such as product margins, number of training programmes, promotional schemes and also intangible items like consistency of organizational outreach, emotional bonding with sales representative and long-term brand trust (Reza et al., 2013) In highly commoditized markets like fertilizers, where technical differences among products are minimal, intangible emotions, stories, and trust often drives differentiation (Malhotra, 2020). Additionally, the cultural context plays a substantial role in shaping how promotional messages are received and interpreted. Existing studies emphasize that metaphors such as "a company as a farming partner" or "a harvest as a reward of faith" are commonly found in rural narratives (Mohanty & Senthil 2017) influencing purchase decisions. These metaphoric frames provide insight into the deeper values and expectations that drive retailer buying behaviour.

In terms of agricultural sector, there lies the significant gap in terms of corporate planning and ground level execution which is due to the lack of emotional alignment and clarity at the operational level (Sull et al., 2015) which often results in strategy failure.

Therefore, intriguing retailers through techniques like ZMET can mitigate this disconnect by highlighting the motivations, gaps, and expectations that drive their interactions of retailers with the company's promotional content. Keeping the same into consideration, present study applies the ZMET methodology to analyse the deeper perception of the retailers towards the promotional strategies deployed by major fertilizer companies in India. The insights obtained can inform not only tactical decisions such as the design of visual materials or incentive schemes but also broader strategic initiatives focused on relationship-building and emotional branding.

This research contributes to a growing body of literature for developing understanding on emotion, metaphor, and subconscious cognition in retailer's behaviour. With such understanding the fertilizer companies can enhance brand loyalty, improve channel effectiveness, and build more resilient

relationships in the agri-input ecosystem.

METHODOLOGY

Area of Study

The study focused on 8 districts of Madhya Pradesh i.e Khargone, Indore, Dhar, Dewas, Ujjain, Shajapur, Agar Malwa and Rajgarh.



Figure 1.1 Map of Study Area

ZMET Process Implementation

The research followed seven key steps of the ZMET protocol



Source: Christensen and Olson (2002)

Figure 2: Elucidation of ZMET process

Data Collection and Analysis

Initially invitations were sent to thirty potential retailers in the selected study area. About 70% of the invited retailers responded positively. These respondents then took part in a short screening to assess how familiar they were with promotional efforts of various companies. From this group, fifteen retailers were carefully selected for in-depth interviews.

These participants were chosen using purposive sampling, where they were selected based on specific qualities or experience (Patton, 2002). To ensure the participants were suitable, they had to meet certain criteria i.e., at least ten years of total retail experience and minimum five years’ experience with fertilizer companies. This approach ensured that the study gathered informed perspectives from those with substantial experience in the fertilizer market.

Each participant was given a unique serial number from one to fifteen to avoid any confusion during the study. All participants were also given a digital version of the Research Instruction Kit, as shown in Table 2. They were clearly informed about the purpose of the study, with special attention given for understanding “their views on the promotional strategies employed by various Fertilizer Companies”

Table 1: Profile of Respondents for ZMET Interview

Sl. No.	Age	Gender	Educational Qualification	Overall Retail Experience
1	55	Male	High School	25
2	40	Male	Intermediate	12
3	45	Male	Intermediate	13

4	42	Male	Graduation	11
5	40	Male	High School	11
6	44	Male	Graduation	12
7	50	Male	Graduation	18
8	46	Male	Intermediate	14
9	41	Male	High School	11
10	43	Male	Graduation	12
11	47	Male	Intermediate	16
12	41	Male	Graduation	12
13	48	Male	High School	15
14	51	Male	High School	16
15	53	Male	High School	17

Table 2: Research instruction kit. Source: Chatterjee and Pandey (2019)

ZMET interview subject	The event described is used as a topic for discussion with a participant in the ZMET method. In this method, the person being interviewed is asked to share their emotional reactions during the interview. Here the participant was asked “What is your opinion about the different promotional strategies used by Yara?”
Demographic Data Form for the Topic	A document containing socioeconomic attributes of a demographic group which includes average household size, age, gender, educational qualification, income range, marital status, and employment status.
Confidentiality Agreement	A formal document that explains the agreement to share data voluntarily. It also includes details about how the subject’s information will be kept private and protected.
Thank You Note	A distinctive note of gratitude acknowledging their voluntary participation in the research study.

Process of Interview

The study used Image Elicitation technique to explore how retailers view company’s promotional strategies. Each participant was asked to bring 5 to 7 images that reflected their thoughts or feelings about various promotions. These visuals helped to start meaningful conversations and reveal deeper emotions and ideas. The participants were asked questions like, “What about this image made you think of Company’s promotions?” and “How does this image connect to your experience with Company’s marketing?” These questions were instrumental for unleashing the hidden emotional responses i.e., trust, motivation, dissatisfaction among others.

The study also focused on understanding among the retailers through the company’s promotions. For doing so, the participants were asked, “What do you think Companies want to accomplish with its promotional efforts?” This helped to examine the association of retailers with company’s philosophy rather than just mechanical interactions. In addition, participants were encouraged to think about any missing element in Company’s current strategies. They gave suggestions on how the company could better communicate its value and improve its promotional efforts.

To examine the extent of competitors, the participants were asked, “How does this image show the difference between promotions of various companies?” This helped identify what made any company’s approach unique.

In the final part of the study, participants created short stories using their selected images. These metaphor-based stories gave even deeper insight into how retailers viewed Company’s promotional activities, including symbolic meanings and emotional connections.

All the insights gathered from the participants were brought together into a “consensus map,” which showed common themes and shared ideas. This map helped highlight what Companies are doing well and where there is

room for improvement. To help illustrate the participants’ views more clearly, the Co-Pilot AI tool was used to create visual representations of their ideas.



Figure 3: Selected Participants Images-Collage (Source: Own Survey Based Outcome)

RESULTS:

While following the step wise ZMET technique, the responses resultant into 16 constructs which are depicted in table 3. Along with the constructs, representative image is also presented in order to examine the retailer’s deep perception associated with the companies’ promotional strategies.

Table 3: Constructs developed through responses by employing ZMET

Image	Construct	Illustrative Statements
	Brand Visibility	“The various promotional efforts done by companies to increase brand visibility and attract customers towards the products are commendable”
	Guiding Light	“When any company initially entered the market, it’s demonstration results served as a guiding light amidst uncertainty”

	<p>Excellent Results</p>	<p>“Applying fertilizers of these companies are like trusting in excellence; it transforms average fields into thriving gardens, producing vibrant chilies that farmers never thought possible.”</p>
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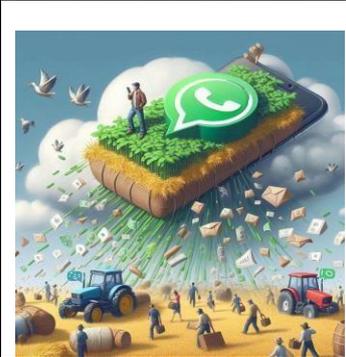
Image	Construct	Illustrative Statements
	<p>Trust</p>	<p>“The farmer centric approach of these companies allows it to stay connected with farmers thereby influencing sales.”</p>
	<p>Customer Management Relationship</p>	<p>“Good knowledge delivery by professionals and the hands-on support and expertise they offer is incredible.”</p>
	<p>Demand Activities Generation</p>	<p>“The Mega farmer meetings conducted by companies have a greater impact on sales. After meetings, liquidation gets faster.”</p>

Image	Construct	Illustrative Statements
		<p>“Companies promotional efforts convey a message of excellence and high standards,</p>

	<p>Excellent Quality</p>	<p>perfectly reflecting the quality of their products. When customers encounter their name, it instantly brings to mind the best, representing a gold standard in the industry.”</p>
	<p>Incentives</p>	<p>“The rewards we get after every purchase makes us excited to buy and sell the products of these companies”</p>
	<p>Fulfillment</p>	<p>“Witnessing a farmer’s joy and satisfaction after a successful harvest brings to mind company’s promotional messages, which highlight their dedication to providing high-quality products and effective solutions”</p>

Image	Construct	Illustrative Statements
	<p>Satisfaction</p>	<p>“When a farmer returns with a smile after using these Products, it feels like a personal victory”</p>
		<p>“The messages communicated by company professionals regarding product quality and</p>

	<p>Success Stories</p>	<p>the results achieved from using their products are entirely consistent”</p>
	<p>Direct Marketing</p>	<p>“Company’s promotional campaigns are very effective for increasing awareness among farmers as it aligns with local market conditions and farmer preferences.”</p>
<p>Image</p>	<p>Construct</p>	<p>Illustrative Statements</p>
	<p>Direct Marketing</p>	<p>"The colorful posters, banners, hoardings of companies are so attractive that it draws the attention of every farmer who visits my shop."</p>
	<p>Rewards</p>	<p>“Scanning of Bar codes on every product gives amazing points which can be converted into cash easily, this makes me motivated to buy and sell more products.”</p>
	<p>Trust</p>	<p>“These companies never fail in the results. It gives excellent results every time”</p>

		
	<p>Digital Marketing</p>	<p>“Every day, when I open WhatsApp, there are a lot of advertisements. By seeing those messages every day, these companies always remain at the top of my mind.”</p>

Further, through metaphor elicitation and laddering interviews with 15 participants, out of identified 16 constructs, six core themes emerged that reflect how retailers perceive the promotional strategies of fertilizer companies. These themes are as: Success Stories, Digital/Social Media Marketing, Product Demonstrations & Field Trials, Direct Marketing, Demand Generation Activities, and Customer/Consultancy Services. These themes reveal a blend of emotional and rational responses tied to retailers lived experiences and expectations.

Theme 1:

Success Stories factor was among the prominent, with several retailers expressing that such companies symbolize excellence and transformation. Participants highlighted that these products have the potential of realizing ordinary fields into high-yield crops, which further inculcates the sense of pride and trust. Retailers could relate the company’s branding with consistency, reliability, and high standards attributes that reflect its strong market reputation.

Theme 2:

The use of modern digital and social media marketing was instrumental for building the company’s image among the retailers. The use of social media platforms like WhatsApp brings daily visibility and ensures continuous brand recall and engagement among retailers and farmers alike.

Theme 3:

Among the most adopted promotional activities by the companies such as Product Demonstrations and Field Trials, retailers observed these as metaphors of guidance and assurance. As per the respondents it is essential in building confidence, especially when comparing them to other brands perceived as less reliable.

Theme 4:

The regular interaction by the company officials, involvement in direct marketing efforts, including expert support and personal engagement, enhanced retailer trust and customer awareness. These initiatives have further aligned the business growth through healthy sales.

Theme 5:

Retailers pointed out the demand generation activities such as barcode scanning for rewards and large-scale farmer events highly instrumental that directly drove sales and enthusiasm for various offerings.

Theme 6:

Customer and Consultancy Services had been key for driving a customer-centric image. Retailers associated good farmer outcomes and harvest satisfaction with the quality and consistency espoused in the company’s communications, and the strength of its advisory services.

Together, these insights portray promotional strategies as a blend of emotional resonance, practical support, and sustained engagement, all contributing to strong brand loyalty and market success among retailers.

DISCUSSION

The outcome of the present research highlights the significance of ZMET approach to explore the deeper emotions among the retailers towards company's promotional strategies. By tapping into these deeper insights, the research was able to identify the effectiveness of Fertilizers companies' promotional strategies through the lens of retailers with further scope of improvement. The majority of the respondents pointed out that the advisory support offered by the companies have found to be quite useful for bringing a positive behavioural outcome. This aligns with Achrol & Kotler's (1999) argument that modern marketing must shift from transactional selling to acting as a trusted consultant offering strategic guidance and knowledge support. Some retailers mention on social and digital media presence aligns with the study by Al Ubaidiyah & Sukaris (2023), who emphasized the role of WhatsApp and digital channels in sustaining brand visibility. The results suggest that while existing strategies arouse both rational and emotional responses, a more integrated approach could yield greater impact. Therefore, the study recommended a combined push-pull promotional strategy wherein the push component would involve incentivizing retailers to actively endorse and sell products to farmers, while the pull component would focus on creating direct demand among farmers through targeted messaging and awareness campaigns. This dual strategy could enhance market penetration and align better with the behavioral patterns and expectations identified through the ZMET-based inquiry.



Figure 4: Combination of push and pull strategy approach

CONCLUSION

This study offers the effectiveness of the ZMET in understanding the subconscious perceptions held by retailers towards Fertilizers company's promotional strategies in India. The study insights reveal that these strategies are not only multifaceted but also emotionally resonant, which further suggest a strong alignment between brand and stakeholders. One of the significant outcomes of the study is that metaphor-based image elicitation process proved instrumental in surfacing deeper layers of perception often overlooked by traditional research methods. As companies remain dynamic with their marketing approaches, integrating cost-sensitive initiatives and maintaining brand equity emerges as a viable alternative. Ultimately, ZMET has proven to be a powerful tool for decoding complex attitudes, offering valuable guidance for crafting more impactful and emotionally intelligent promotional strategies in space of agri-input sector especially fertilizer companies (see figure 4).

Implications

Present study offers crucial implications for businesses as well as for academic literature. The companies can strategically customize their marketing efforts while understanding deeper perception of important stakeholders say retailers. This study also results in building academic understanding on various constructs for driving the effectiveness of promotional activities and further studies can also explore the deeper perceptions of other stakeholders in agriculture and related sectors.

Limitations and future research directions

Present study contributes in the existing literature of understanding deeper perceptions among the business stakeholders while the future research might undertake the use of identified constructs for other stakeholders say wholesales, traders not only in agricultural domain but overall business organizations. Further, the study findings remain limited to a small sample group which can be

replicated to other set of samples with similar characteristics in different geography.

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