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ALL'S FAIR IN THIS BUSINESS CALL

Telcos Tap 'Fe-tailers' to Set Sales Counters Ringing

Aircel, Vodafone engage women to push sales and reach out to new areas

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Apan ko Dhoni se milna hai, aur mujhe to gaadi leni hai. Mere husband bas usi mein lage huein hain aaj kal (I want to meet Dhoni and I want a car. My husband is busy with that these days)", says Shweta Jain, a housewife in Jaipur whose husband, Rajesh Jain, runs a shop selling mobile connections and accessories.

She's talking about a reward programme that telecom service provider Aircel has initiated for the wives of its retail partners. Six women whose husbands sell the highest number of Aircel connections between March 10 and May end get a Hyundai Santro car, while a few others selected will get to meet the Indian cricket captain.

In India's highly competitive telecom market where subscriber growth has hit a snag, two companies, Aircel and Vodafone, are betting on the persuasive power of women to boost sales. Both claim phenomenal initial success and have a clear roadmap ahead.

While Aircel has reached out to the families of dealers to involve women, Vodafone is pushing sales in remote areas through an army of female retailers, or 'fe-tailers'.

"Business volumes have shot up tenfold in Haryana's remote corners after our first batch of 'fe-tailers' did transactions worth over a ₹1 lakh in the first month compared to a paltry sub-₹10K level earlier through normal retail points in these parts," said a top Vodafone executive.

The company—which trained women who were tea stall vendors, fruit and vegetable sellers to sell its recharge vouchers and E-Top Ups at Narnaul in Haryana's Mahendragarh district—now plans to replicate the model, christened Project Samridhi, across the country as over 50% of its 149 million customers reside in the countryside.

Aircel, too, has seen significant gain in sales after it stated involving women. In Rajasthan,

where vendors like Rajesh Jain contributed 20% of sales two years ago, they now contribute 50%, a company spokeswoman said.

Aircel started the programme in Mumbai last month and it has already resulted in a 15% contribution to sales, she said.

Besides giving away gifts, Aircel offers a percentage share of revenue from any connection sold by a vendor. As a result every time a user recharges a SIM card, no matter the location, the original vendor of that number benefits.

Renu Bhatia, whose husband Rajesh sells connections for Bharti Airtel, Vodafone, Idea and Aircel, says at her insistence her husband sold so many Aircel connections last year that they amassed ₹1.2 lakh and went on a family holiday to Bangkok.

The mobile operator hardly misses a chance to reach out to vendors' families.

Engaging women as channel partners can translate into higher mobile penetration

"On a pooja day I was so depressed because I didn't have time to put mehndi, and I felt as if no one cared for me. But that afternoon, a team from Aircel arrived with mehndi and they made me celebrate well. I felt great. Aircel is the best!" Bhatia says.

Recently, Aircel held a Women's Day function and offered free medical check-ups. This was followed by an interaction of wives of Aircel officials in a filial setting.

If Aircel is wooing women in mostly cities through its special schemes, Vodafone is empowering women in rural areas. This helps it reach out to women who won't or aren't allowed to interact with male vendors.

"Samridhi is a revenue-sharing model as the earnings of our fe-tailers will hinge on the sales they do. To motivate them to drive more business, we will give them target-linked incentives," Sunil Sood, chief operating officer at Vodafone India, said, adding that the model



Growth Link

would get replicated across the country.

Instead of a fixed rate, the fe-tailers are given target-linked incentives under three slabs of ₹3,000, ₹5,000 and ₹10,000 per month.

Neha Dharia, an analyst at telecoms consultancy firm Ovum, says engaging women as channel partners can translate in higher mobile penetration in patriarchal societies since the comfort factor of dealing with a female mobile retailer would, typically, be more than a male vendor. "Apart from selling recharge vouchers in villages, women retailers could also handle mobile money transfers and mobile payment services, especially since people living in isolated areas won't have to then worry about transferring money across villages and towns since they won't have to rely on others to bring it to them," Dharia says.

While Vodafone says it has no immediate plans to ask its women retailers to also handle mobile money transfers in villages, company insiders are not ruling out the possibility, especially post-rollout of M-Pesa nationally.

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