

Official Paper

Selling Abroad

Marketing & Advertising in Export Promotion, Edited by Pothen Phillip, Indian Society of Advertisers, Bombay. Pp 148. Price RS 15.

TARDINESS, seemingly is not a prerogative of Governments alone. A conference on 'Marketing and Advertising in Export Promotion' was held in New Delhi in March 1961 but its 148-page printed report was circulated at the most a month ago, notwithstanding all the sense of urgency and concern manifested on its pages.

Carefully reading through the 148 pages, certain things strike one as curious. Although the conference had the benefit of highly instructive analyses of the tasks facing India in the export field by Sir Donald McDougall, Fellow of the Nuffield College, and Shri D S Joshi, Additional Secretary to Government of India in charge of export promotion, few participants from the marketing and advertising fraternity seemed informed of the magnitudes of the problem. But they were in good company—Pandit Nehru's inaugural address to the conference achieved an all-time high in irrelevance, serving only to bring out his well-known, oft-repeated antipathy to advertising. Except for noting the fact that export promotion was the theme of the conference, and another passing reference to the importance of exports, he devoted most of his 20-minute address to thinking aloud the ethics of advertising. Feeling obliged, perhaps, to pull his punches out of deference to the hosts, his ethical questionings were also not too coherent. Morarjibhai (as everybody appeared to have called him at this meet) was marginally superior to the PM in his extempore effort, which at least had the merit of keeping in touch with the subject of export throughout its length. For sheer inanity, the following excerpt from the Finance Minister's speech is, however, hard to beat:

"I am quite sure even in marketing research this country can come up to the highest standard, if it only applies itself to the task properly. But there is one handicap, and that is we are starting from a very low standard of living." (italics added). —p 38.

Shri Lal Bahadur Shustri made, however, a considered and thoughtful contribution in what was apparently a prepared speech. He acknowledged that marketing and advertising were the weakest "links in the whole chain of our export promotion drive". He threw out two suggestions an internal advertising campaign to make the nation export-minded, and joint advertising by commodity groups and industrial associations to spread out the high costs which individual firms might find difficult, to absorb singly. He even touched upon matters of detail — the advantages of sponsoring special supplements in important foreign newspapers to advertise Indian industry and branded goods abroad.

Export Councils Not Represented

Although there was no dearth of distinguished participants, some lesser men who might have made useful contributions were curiously missing. None of the Export Promotion Councils was represented, nor such bodies as the Tea Board or IJMA which have first hand experience of export marketing. As R V Leyden, the last speaker, remarked: "It would have been very much more profitable for this conference if . . . there was a speaker from an organisation like the Jay Engineering Co who have been selling sewing machines all over the world, or a representative of coir industry on the Malabar coast, who export quite enormous quantities". Another anomaly was asking Government of India's Director of Advertising and Visual Publicity from the Information Ministry to speak on the role of exhibitions in export promotion, when the organisers might just easily have called in the Director of Exhibition in the Ministry of Commerce & Industry who is actually in charge of all such efforts. He might have been able to tell the conference of his problems and difficulties— notably the lack of co-operation from industry at first hand.

Fairly early in course of the conference, it seemed agreed that India

needed a new image in her overseas markets. As R K Sirkar put it, "To the average American, the image of India is probably an odd mixture of monkeys (thanks to our export promotion of this item), sacred cows, handicrafts and monuments". P L Tandon was more explicit: "You pay for the confidence that the country selling you the product has created in you". Morarji Desai had also made the same point: "Marketing abroad is marketing the reputation of this country and ultimately it is not the goods that will sell, it is the country which sells".

This realisation notwithstanding, the conference did not devote any time at all to considering how a more helpful image of India could be established abroad. Neither was any reference made to this all important issue in the final resolution adopted at the conference. Yet as Sir Donald McDougall pointed out, a major part of the increase in exports would have to come from the new manufacturing industries. In the purchase of these products — electrical apparatus, consumer durables, bicycles and the like — customer confidence in the engineering skill and tradition of the producing country is all important, as participants in the conference would undoubtedly have known.

Operational Problems Avoided

The two-day conference, did not seem to have come to grips with the live, operational problems faced in export promotion either. Useful suggestions were made — S N Banerjee came up with the idea of forming a consortium of advertising agencies to handle export advertising. The volume of export advertising handled by individual agencies was too small to warrant laying out adequate funds for specialised study of the different markets, their media and other characteristics. If all export advertising were pooled in a strong, central agency, the problem could be solved. A similar suggestion was made in the 1957 report of the Export Promotion Committee (p 67) which had cited the exam-



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ples of the defunct British Export Trade Advertising Corporation and its market research counterpart, British Export Trade Research Organisation. S N Banerjee might have mentioned that a good precedent existed for the pooling of business to carry out a specific assignment—the Creative Advertising Unit constituted during the war by the agencies to handle Government business. But, it is disappointing to note, that the pool idea did not attract much notice—neither the conference summing up nor the final resolution makes any reference to it.

Throughout the conference, the problems that are already arising in export advertising found little reflection. The reviewer knows, for instance, of one Export Promotion Council which gave matching grants for export advertising to 32 branded products last year. Only 7 were spending more than Rs 5,000, 3 more than Rs 10,000 over the whole year. The Council itself spent Rs 33,161.58 on advertising in the year against the total exports of almost Rs 10 crores - mostly in non-traditional products. No detailed account is given of the way in which the Council disbursed its advertising budget but more than a dozen countries in four continents must have been covered. Someone must make the Councils realise that such totally inadequate expenditure will get them nowhere; some one must tell the Directorate of Export Promotion in New Delhi that allocation of such meagre funds to the Councils serves no purpose at all. This was a task the conference might have usefully performed—holding, as it did, Lal Bahadur Shastri and D S Joshi "captive" for one session each.

Commercial Broadcasting

The conference resolution apart from a general exhortation to export and prosper—offers just one concrete suggestion: "Commercial broadcasting to the export markets is a facility that is at once effective and economical and should be provided to Indian exporters". This plea for commercial broadcasting was not unexpected—the Indian Society of Advertisers, the sponsoring body, has been vigorously advocating it for some time. The case for it was not argued however in

any detail; it was brought up only once in the address welcoming the Prime Minister. In course of this, the ISA Chairman said that this medium would help in "popularising some of our goods and brands in the world market". What he really had in mind was neighbouring markets like Burma, Malaya, Pakistan and East Africa. In relation to these, a commercial programme may be marginally helpful in promoting sales of soap, tooth-paste and other mass consumption products. But the net gain from boosting such exports is unlikely to be of an order to justify making 'commercial broadcasting—the one and only concrete suggestion put forward to the Government by this high, powered conference.

One or two attempts were made in course of discussions to focus attention on specific problems. F S Badiwalla, a bucket-maker, brought up the problems of the small exporter. His question was, however, quickly dismissed with the suggestion that small exporters should gel together in associations for joint campaigns. But he persisted with his question, pleading that the trade was too ill-organised for such efforts. At this point it was possible to have recommended constituting an export house to take charge of the export drive of small units in unorganised industries. D S Joshi had mentioned the part export houses could play, but such organisational questions were totally ignored. Their immediate importance in relation to promotion activities will be clear from the following excerpt from the 1961 report of Engineering Export Promotion Council's trade delegation to West Asian and West European countries:

"Excepting a few leading Indian exporters who can send their representatives abroad from time to time, personal contacts are out of question in respect of a large number of small manufacturers scattered throughout the country. The only way in which these products could be made known is to set up Export Houses whose jobs would be to offer new products to new markets and also financial guarantee and market research facilities, which are conspicuous by the absence in the case of small manufacturers."

Problems of Small Manufacturer Not Considered

But the conference was unconcerned about the special difficulties of the small manufacturer. A representative of one of the largest trading groups in India immediately arose to sermonise Badiwalla: "Put your own house in order, bring the trade together and then operate. If you fail internally, then you must fail abroad". What this exchange, recorded in cold print, does to JSA's own image is for the reader to judge.

The overall impression that comes through of the conference may now be summed up. As mentioned, the broad dimensions of the export problem did not seem too clearly defined in the minds of the professionals, gathered together on this occasion. No one, for instance, sized up to what proportion of present exports do the problems of brand advertising apply, or what part still branded products play in stepping up exports. No one made any specific suggestions on the nature and content of commercial intelligence the (Government's Consular organisations should provide, although Lai Itahadur Shastri had himself admitted the need for improvement.

Admittedly this was "a new conference on a new subject" as P L Tandon remarked at the outset, but the all too many omissions in its approach to what is indeed India's most vital problem raise doubts about the seriousness of purpose of its organisers. One might, in fact, ask whether export promotion was not used as just another public relations platform by ISA. like the subsequent (and entirely commendable) campaign for the Prime Minister's Relief Fund. There is nothing wrong with ISA adopting a platform but the task it takes up should be well-performed, otherwise the result is reverse of public relations.

One final comment. The printing of the report does credit to ISA's standards but the same cannot unfortunately be said of the editing. In a hurried stenographic record, mistakes might have been excusable, but now that we are recollecting the conference in tranquility, some tidying up of extempore remarks could legitimately be expected.

