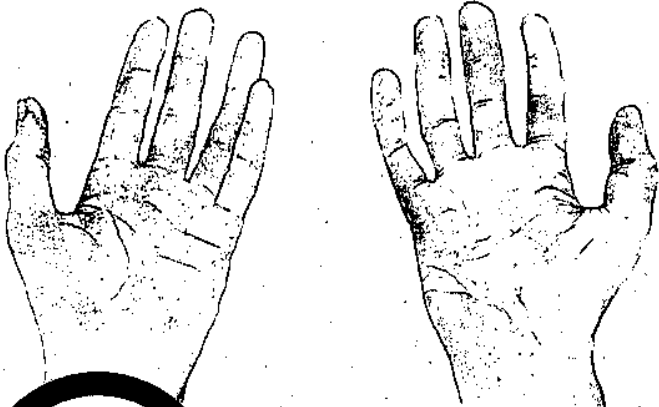
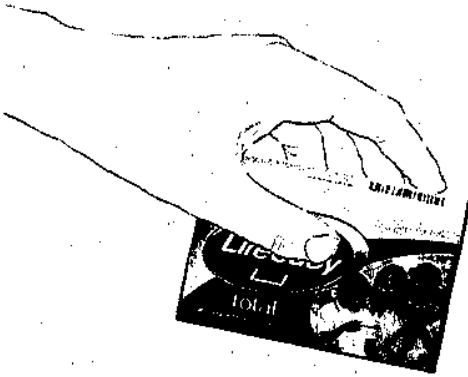


# Cleaning Up

A brand shows its social responsibility to the poor — by selling to them.



Lifebuoy Soap

“Corporate social responsibility” often means leveraging the concern (or guilt) of the affluent on behalf of those less fortunate: Sell to first-world consumers and redistribute some of the profits to address third-world problems. But a case has been made for a different strategy that involves selling to the poor themselves. In a speech last month, for instance, Harish Manwani, the chairman of Hindustan Lever Limited, pointed to his firm’s marketing Lifebuoy soap to India’s sprawling underclass as an example of its efforts to bring “social responsibility to the heart of our business.”

Hindustan Lever is a subsidiary of Unilever, the packaged-goods giant (it owns brands including Dove and Ben & Jerry’s) that was formed in 1929 by the merger of the British soap maker Lever Brothers and the Dutch food company Margarine Unie. Global brands seem like a recent phenomenon, but Lever was already operating around the world when Lifebuoy entered the Indian market more than a hundred years ago. Another thing that existed a hundred years ago and is still around today is a large number of preventable deaths.

In his speech, Manwani focused on deaths caused by diarrhea-related

diseases (the World Health Organization estimates such illnesses kill 1.8 million people a year) and noted that better hand-washing habits — using soap — is one way to prevent their spread. For several years, the World Bank has been involved in initiatives with multinationals, including Unilever, to address the issue.

Hindustan Lever’s Lifebuoy campaign, however, is not philanthropy; it’s business. Throughout its long life, the antibacterial soap has been positioned as a health-and-wellness product: a 1902 ad in Harper’s promised “this wonderful cleanser and purifier” was “the enemy of dirt and disease.” That “core proposition” remains, says Punit Misra, the marketing manager who oversees Lifebuoy and other skin-cleansing brands for Hindustan Lever. Perhaps the most significant change to the product itself in recent years has been the introduction of smaller, and thus cheaper, bars: a half-size, 50-gram bar, for five rupees (about two ounces, for roughly 12 cents), was introduced in the early 1990s. (The small-package approach is now used by many companies in developing markets.) More recently, the packaging was made “more contemporary” by replacing the “strapping young man” on the package with an image of a couple and their children, Misra says.

And five years ago, the company introduced a campaign called *Swasthya Chetna* or “Glowing Health,” which, boiled down, argues that even clean-looking hands may carry dangerous germs, so use more soap. It began a concentrated effort to take this message into the tens of thousands of villages where the rural poor reside, often with little access to media. “Lifebuoy teams visit each village several times,” Manwani said in his speech, using “a glo-germ kit to show schoolchildren” that soap-washed hands are cleaner. Manwani says this program has reached “around 80 million rural folk” and added that “sales of Lifebuoy have risen sharply.” The small bar has become the brand’s top seller.

C.K. Prahalad, a University of Michigan professor (and Hindustan Lever board member), uses the India Lifebuoy story as a case study in his 2004 book “The Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid,” which argues that the profit motive can be a powerful force in addressing global poverty issues. Building a campaign around a well-known product like Lifebuoy can be effective precisely because even the world’s poorest citizens can be “brand conscious.” (Hindustan Lever’s Misra agrees, saying that such consumers will stick with a brand they trust, because “money means that much more to them.”)

Still, is this really the right place for the profit motive? Hindustan Lever’s position is that profitable responsibility is the point. “If it’s not really self-sustaining,” Misra says, “somewhere along the line it will drop off.” Prahalad makes similar points. “The question that comes up all the time is: These companies are pushing consumption, but what we need is livelihood improvement,” he told me in an interview. But preventing illness also means a family might avoid a potentially devastating loss of several days’ work. And ultimately, he says, campaigns like Lifebuoy’s *Swasthya Chetna* should be evaluated not ideologically but by their impact on the global poor. “The alternative,” he said, “is needless death.” ■