



## Packaging as a strategic advertising medium in the FMCG sector: A comparative analysis of HUL, ITC, and Marico

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### Abstract

In the fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) sector, packaging has evolved beyond its traditional logistical role into a critical marketing tool that directly influences consumer decisions at the point of sale. Often described as a “silent salesman,” packaging now communicates brand identity, value propositions, and sustainability commitments in a matter of seconds. This paper examines how three leading Indian FMCG firms—Hindustan Unilever Limited (HUL), ITC Limited, and Marico strategically uses packaging as an advertising medium.

Using qualitative analysis of secondary data, the study finds that HUL emphasizes accessibility and purpose driven messaging, ITC leverages sustainable and premium packaging through vertical integration, and Marico focuses on functional innovation and strong visual identity. The paper argues that packaging is not merely supportive but central to brand differentiation and consumer engagement, particularly in emerging markets like India

**Keywords:** FMCG, packaging, silent salesman, sustainability, branding.

### Introduction

The Indian FMCG sector, valued at over \$100 billion, is characterized by intense competition, low switching costs, and highly price-sensitive consumers. In such an environment, influencing consumer choice at the retail shelf becomes crucial. Research suggests that a significant proportion of purchase decisions—often cited as 70–80% are made at the point of sale.

This is where packaging plays a decisive role. Unlike traditional advertising, which is episodic and expensive, packaging offers a continuous and cost-effective communication channel. It not only protects the product but also conveys quality, builds trust, and triggers impulse purchases.

This study focuses on three major players HUL, ITC, and Marico to understand how packaging strategies differ across business models and consumer segments.

### Literature Review

In the FMCG sector, packaging has evolved from merely protecting and storing products to becoming a powerful marketing tool that shapes consumer perceptions and buying behaviour. Research highlights that factors such as design, colour, labelling, and sustainability messaging can strongly influence purchasing decisions (Malik & Bhargaw, 2020; Banerjee & Kedia, 2018) [7, 8].

Sustainability has emerged as a key consideration in packaging strategies. Leading Indian FMCG companies like HUL, ITC, and Marico are increasingly adopting environmentally friendly packaging to strengthen their brand image and address growing consumer concerns about the environment (Gomes, 2025; Gupta & Sharma, 2025; Mondal, 2025) [2, 10]. Despite this, challenges such as higher costs and supply chain limitations continue to pose obstacles (Goel *et al.*, 2025) [5].

A review of company practices reveals distinct approaches: HUL prioritizes attractive and informative packaging, ITC blends premium aesthetics with sustainable solutions, and Marico focuses on lightweight, recyclable packaging. In

essence, packaging in these companies not only functions as a marketing medium but also communicates their commitment to sustainability, helping them stand out in a highly competitive market.

In the Indian context, the dominance of small retail outlets (Kirana stores) further amplifies the importance of packaging, as shelf space is limited and consumer attention is fragmented.

### Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative study approach. Data has been collected from secondary sources, including company reports, sustainability disclosures, and industry analysis published between 2015 and 2025.

The study focuses on:

- Visual design elements
- Material choices
- Functional innovations
- Advertising messages embedded in packaging

### Analysis

#### Hindustan Unilever Limited (HUL)

#### Packaging as a “Silent Salesman” in Retail

HUL leverages visually distinctive designs such as Lifebuoy’s recognizable red or Dove’s elegant, premium look to make its products instantly noticeable on shelves.

#### Use of Small Packs and Sachets

The company also focuses on affordability and accessibility by offering products in small packs and single-use sachets. These act as low-cost trial options, helping consumers experience the product before committing to larger purchases, while also expanding reach in price-sensitive markets. Example Clinic Plus, Dove, Glow&Lovely etc.

#### Smart and Interactive Packaging

To enhance consumer engagement, HUL integrates digital elements into its packaging, such as QR codes. These allow users to access additional content like product details,

recipes, or interactive experiences, effectively connecting offline and online touchpoints. Example Kissan jam “fark to fork” journey.

**Refill Solutions and “Smart Fill” Machines**

HUL has introduced refill stations in stores, encouraging customers to reuse containers. These “Smart Fill” machines not only reduce plastic waste but also reinforce the brand’s commitment to sustainability and innovation. Pilot machine located at Reliance Smart Mumbai

**Highlighting Product Benefits Clearly**

Packaging is also used as a communication tool to showcase key product features. Claims such as “natural,” “organic,” or specific performance benefits are prominently displayed, helping customers quickly understand what makes the product unique.

**ITC**

**Premium Look and Feel**

ITC focuses heavily on making its packaging stand out, especially for premium products. By using techniques like UV offset printing, foil detailing, and embossing, the packaging looks more refined and high-end, instantly elevating how consumers perceive the product.

**Engaging the Senses**

To create a more memorable experience, ITC has introduced features like “rub-and-sniff” labels. This allows customers to actually smell products like soaps or shampoos before opening them, making the interaction more personal and engaging. Example Fiamma shower gel, soaps etc and Managaldeep Agarbatti

**Use of Recycled Materials**

ITC also incorporates post-consumer recycled materials into packaging for certain products. By clearly communicating this on the pack, it appeals to environmentally conscious buyers. Example Savlon glycerine soap wrapper uses 70% post-consumer recycled material.

**Augmented Reality (AR) Integration**

ITC is turning packaging into an interactive platform by using AR technology. Customers can scan packs with their smartphones to access digital experiences, making the product more engaging beyond just physical use. Example Classmate Notebooks.

**Smart and Convenient Packaging**

Innovations like microwavable snack boxes add convenience while also showcasing the brand’s forward-thinking approach. These features make the packaging both functional and a marketing tool. Example Kitchens of India ready to eat products.

**Anti-Counterfeiting Features**

To safeguard its brands, ITC incorporates both visible and hidden security elements in its packaging. This helps

customers trust that they are buying genuine products. Uses Non cloneable QR and holograms.

**Consistent Branding**

Across its product range, ITC maintains a uniform and recognizable packaging style. This consistency strengthens brand identity and makes products easily identifiable on shelves.

**Marico**

**Story-Driven and Campaign-Based Packaging**

Marico has cleverly turned its packaging into a storytelling medium. For instance, the special farmer edition of Parachute Advanced Gold featured real stories of farmers, showing appreciation for their contribution and building an emotional connection with consumers. In another initiative, Parachute Advanced Ayurvedic highlighted actual users on its packaging by printing their photos, names, and cities, making the brand feel more authentic and relatable.

**Interactive and Personalized Packaging**

The company has also explored ways to actively involve consumers. Through the #WheresYourFace campaign, Set Wet allowed people to customize deodorant cans with their own faces, creating excitement and strong social media engagement. Additionally, Parachute Advanced introduced seed paper neck tags in special edition packs, encouraging consumers to plant them—symbolizing growth and reinforcing the brand’s natural positioning.

**Visual Appeal and Informative Branding**

Marico focuses on making packaging both attractive and informative. Products like Saffola Honey use design elements to highlight purity and origin, such as sourcing from the Sundarbans, while also educating consumers about health benefits. Clear labelling is another priority, helping build trust by communicating product safety and effectiveness. For premium segments like Parachute Advanced Body Oil, sleek, tinted transparent bottles are used to convey a modern and high-quality image.

**Sustainability as a Core Message**

Sustainability plays a major role in Marico’s packaging strategy. A large share of its packaging is now recyclable, and the company actively communicates its environmental efforts. It emphasizes reduced use of virgin plastic and increased adoption of recycled materials, appealing to eco-conscious buyers. Even design innovations, like using some of the lightest plastic bottles in the category, are positioned as a competitive advantage.

**Influencer-Backed Packaging Revamps**

When Marico updates its packaging, it supports the launch with strong digital campaigns. For example, redesigns like that of Saffola Honey are promoted through CGI content and influencer collaborations, generating excitement and awareness even before the products reach store shelves.

**Comparative analysis**

Company	Packaging Focus	Key Features	Sustainability Approach
Hindustan Unilever Limited	Visibility & affordability	Bright, eye-catching designs, small packs/sachets for mass reach, clear benefit communication	Refill solutions to reduce waste
ITC Limited	Premium appeal &	High-end designs, sensory elements, advanced tech	Eco-friendly materials highlighted

	innovation	like AR	prominently
Marico	Storytelling & personalization	Emotional connection through campaigns, modern, attractive design	Emphasis on recyclable materials

### Conclusion

Packaging's strength as an advertising medium lies in its immediacy and persistence. Unlike traditional ads, it is present at the exact moment of decision-making. That said, challenges remain. Rising material costs, increasing regulatory pressure on plastics, and the risk of imitation require continuous innovation. Moreover, as consumers become more informed, superficial sustainability claims may no longer be sufficient. Future opportunities lie in smart packaging technologies, such as QR codes, which can extend the consumer experience beyond the physical product. This study highlights that packaging is no longer a secondary function in FMCG marketing it is a strategic asset. Companies like HUL, ITC, and Marico demonstrate that effective packaging can drive sales, build brand equity, and communicate values without relying heavily on traditional advertising. As consumer expectations evolve, especially in emerging markets, packaging will continue to play a central role in shaping competitive advantage.

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