



Management consultant Harinder Sahni analyses the highs and lows of the fashion retail industry. Covering a spectrum of topics, each month he looks at the need of the hour for India.

Intimatewear an undiscovered territory

We all know that womenswear overall is a mysteriously under-tapped market segment in the Indian fashion industry and a lot has been said and written about it, while very little has been done. One of the major reasons for many apparel companies not wanting to test womenswear is the uncertainty about where the Indian women's wardrobe is headed in terms of ethnicwear and Westernwear. Somehow it has been accepted by most of the branded apparel companies and retailers that Westernwear will ultimately replace ethnicwear. The big debate is "when" will saris and salwar kameez be inevitably replaced by pants, skirts and jeans. Hence they haven't focused much on ethnicwear and have tried to build brands around Westernwear. But the market size for the Westernwear, though growing really fast but on a smaller base, is still much smaller than the ethnicwear market. The dilemma continues.

I have tried to address this issue in my previous articles but today I wanted to shift our attention away from this debate

of women's outer clothing and explore intimatewear. The most interesting part about intimatewear its need is independent of the type of clothing a woman wears as the main dress. The need for intimatewear, though differentiated, certainly exists there in case of both ethnicwear as well Westernwear. Be it a sari, salwar kameez, skirt and top, jeans and T-shirt or an evening dress, a woman needs an appropriate intimatewear to go with each of these attires.

So, for companies that are unable to decide between ethnicwear and westernwear route to tap the womenswear market, the intimatewear segment offers a very obvious and large, and equally untapped opportunity.

All women from the age of probably 16 years upwards need intimatewear (read bras) on an everyday basis; hence the market potential is huge and growing. The needs being very different at different stages of consumers' life stage and also specific types of bras needed for different kinds of clothing, offer enough micro segmentation for numerous players.

On a broader level, we can classify the market into four clear segments based on the stage of evolution of consumers

and overall market. I call these the "4 Fs" of the intimatewear market. These are:

- Function
- Fashion
- Fun
- Fantasy

The basic reason the market exists for intimatewear is purely functional. Women need to wear a bra for support and to save themselves from various medical complications later in life, leave aside the vanity part for argument sake. Hence all women should wear a bra for this functional reason and the ones who don't, need to be educated to do so for their own good. Functional needs sit at the base level of this market and obviously is the largest opportunity in Indian market that is just developing.

Once the market covers the functional state, certain segments of consumers are ready for the next level and start considering even intimatewear with a fashion consciousness. There are two elements to this fashion: one is picking the right intimatewear items to go with a fashionable dress - a strapless bra to go with a shoulderless evening gown, and second is to pick intimatewear that itself is fashionable in terms of colour and styling of the season. A large set of Indian urban consumers have started considering the fashion angle into their intimatewear over



the last few years, and this is growing quite rapidly. With more and more Westernwear becoming popular and women taking all aspects of their wardrobe more seriously, I expect that fashion segment of the market will become really significant very soon.

The next level of the evolution of intimatewear market is fuelled by the younger consumers who are looking for fun in everything they do. This is a step forward from the fashion level, and consumers are looking to flaunt their attitude using intimatewear as a medium. Be it the design or cartoon characters splashed across or the naughtiness of a push-up bra, all these are ways to add fun and frolic to the hidden world of intimatewear. Internationally, there are numerous brands that have built significant businesses around this single element.

The final and ultimate frontier in intimatewear is wrapped in fantasy and is built around the idea of making intimatewear

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the main clothing item in the most intimate world. Players such as Victoria's Secret have created a mass market for fantasy - driven intimatewear in the U.S. and so have players such as La Pearl in Europe. While the Indian market is really tiny for this segment as of now, I expect that the consumers will step up from fashion and fun to the fantasy level pretty quickly over next few years.

Another interesting fact about this 4 Fs segmentation is that the price-value equation changes dramatically from one level to another. It's obvious that the consumers will pay bare minimum for any item at the pure functional level and also that the largest numbers of consumers will belong to this

segment. However, the gap between the price levels from say "function to fun" or "fashion to fantasy" can be dramatically higher in case of intimatewear. Amongst all clothing items, intimatewear probably straddles the widest price spectrum - from less than one dollar to a million dollar bra!

This undiscovered untapped opportunity is extremely large and attractive not only in terms of bringing products that will serve all of these 4Fs, but is equally attractive if not more at the retail level. I have observed that probably Indian women are the only women in the world who buy bras in sets of 6 every time. The reason is that the retail experience of buying intimate wear is so pathetic that the woman wants to get over with it at the soonest and also not wanting to repeat it any sooner. While some of the department stores focus on this section, still the experience is far from what is conducive for shopping for intimatewear even for functional segment, what to say about fashion and fun, while fantasy may still remain a fantasy.

Without ignoring the not-so-successful foray of the some of the brands and retailers in this segment of womenswear, I still believe that companies interested in women's fashion should consider this as a serious business opportunity and should be able to build a business to last. **BoF**

