

Bayer Consumer's Sandeep Verma on AI risks, influencer chaos, and India's real consumers

Bayer's Sandeep Verma unpacks India's evolving consumer health landscape where AI, influencers, and quick commerce disrupt marketing, but TV, trust, and deep localisation still define real scale and impact.

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India isn't one market, says Bayer's Sandeep Verma, as he decodes healthcare, AI, and media realities.

At a time when marketers are obsessing over AI, reels, and the next big digital disruption, Bayer Consumer Health's South Asia head Sandeep Verma is urging a pause and a reality check.

In an exclusive conversation with Storyboard18, Verma maps the widening gap between perception and reality in India's consumer landscape. From overestimating digital adoption to underestimating the risks of influencer-led health advice, he argues that brands are at a critical inflection point where scale, science, and credibility must co-exist with speed, AI, and content experimentation.

Sitting at the intersection of FMCG-style marketing and healthcare precision, Verma's perspective is particularly relevant right now, as brands grapple with everything from IPL media bets to AI-generated content and the rise of quick commerce. His takeaway is clear: India's consumer health story is no longer linear—it's fragmented, fast-moving, and far more complex than most playbooks acknowledge.

"Very often, we fall into the trap of generalisations," Verma says, reflecting on how easily marketers assume India has gone fully digital. Inside metros and corporate circles, the narrative is dominated by apps, AI, and e-commerce. But step outside that ecosystem, and the story changes dramatically.

"We sit in our cities thinking everybody is digital. That's not true," he explains. "TV is still super strong in a large part of India."

For Bayer, that reality translates directly into spend. Even for its largest brands, a significant portion of media investment still goes to television, particularly to reach audiences in tier 2, tier 3, and rural markets. Prime-time programming, from daily soaps to reality shows, continues to command high engagement. In a country as diverse as India, mass behaviour hasn't shifted as uniformly as digital narratives suggest.

At the same time, the content ecosystem itself is undergoing a chaotic transformation. Micro dramas, short-form storytelling, and AI-generated narratives are exploding across platforms. While the space is attracting serious players, from major studios to global streamers, Verma is clear that quality remains inconsistent.

"There is so much rubbish content right now," he says candidly. "And as a healthcare brand, you have to be careful about what you associate with."

Unlike FMCG categories, where entertainment can drive recall and brand switching, healthcare operates under stricter rules. Credibility is fragile, and poor associations can erode trust quickly. For Bayer, that has meant staying cautious on newer formats like micro dramas, at least until the ecosystem matures.

The rise of AI is simultaneously creating opportunity and anxiety. Verma believes AI has the potential to fundamentally reshape access to healthcare in India.

"The biggest issue in India is accessibility, not just products, but understanding," he says. "AI can democratise that."

Consumers today are no longer just Googling symptoms—they are increasingly turning to AI platforms for advice. That shift, however, comes with risks. In healthcare, even small inaccuracies can have outsized consequences.

"If the source of information is even slightly off, the output can be completely wrong," Verma explains. "That's the challenge for brands."

Internally, Bayer is leaning heavily into AI, using it across the marketing and supply chain spectrum. From identifying consumer cohorts to generating insights and even creating campaign content, AI has become an integrated capability. What stands out is its ability to enable micro-targeting at scale.

"We're creating different narratives for gym-goers, gig workers, office professionals, each with their own insights and content," he says. "Earlier, this would have been extremely expensive."

Yet, as AI makes content creation easier, Verma anticipates a temporary dip in quality. With barriers to entry lowered, mediocrity will flood the system before originality regains its value.

"In the short term, everyone can create. But eventually, authenticity and original thinking will matter even more," he says.

That tension is also evident in influencer marketing, which Bayer has scaled rapidly. From having no influencers two years ago, the company now works with hundreds across brands. Internally, they are referred to as "convincers," a mix of influencers and medical professionals.

But Verma is wary of the current ecosystem.

"Anyone can talk about anything today," he says. "There's no real check, and consumers can't easily differentiate."

In a category like healthcare, where the goal is not just to sell but to educate, misinformation can be dangerous. Influencers play an important role, but only when backed by credibility and knowledge.

"In FMCG, entertainment can work. In healthcare, it's about getting the basics right why you need the product in the first place," he explains.

Verma draws a parallel between AI and influencers, noting that both operate under similar constraints.

"In some cases, AI might actually be more reliable if you can ensure the source is right," he says.

On the media investment front, Bayer has consciously moved away from chasing scale through properties like the IPL. Instead, it has focused on more targeted platforms such as the Women's Premier League.

"The audience there is more relevant for us—more engaged, more serious," Verma says. For a category built on behaviour change, the quality of audience often matters more than pure reach.

Quick commerce is another emerging lever, though still in its early stages for consumer health. Regulatory requirements limit the number of outlets that can sell OTC medicines, and more importantly, most categories still require consumer education.

"You can't just rely on impulse," Verma explains. "In healthcare, you're not only convincing someone to choose your brand, but you're also convincing them to enter the category."

That said, quick commerce has clear use cases, particularly for problem-solution products like pain relief. When immediacy meets need, the format becomes highly effective.

All these shifts point to a larger transformation underway in consumer health. The category is moving away from episodic usage, taking products only when sick, to becoming part of everyday routines.

"We're shifting from illness-led consumption to daily relevance," Verma says.

For legacy brands like Saridon, this evolution is as much about culture as it is about strategy. Verma emphasises that modernisation doesn't mean abandoning identity.

"You change the expression, not the essence," he says. The brand's core promise remains intact, but the way it communicates, through platforms, language, and contexts—evolves with the consumer.

Looking at India through a global lens, Verma believes multinationals often misread the market. They treat it as a single entity, underestimate its digital maturity, and overplay price sensitivity.

"India is many markets within one country," he says. "And consumers here are value-conscious, not just price-conscious."

As Bayer works towards its ambition of reaching 100 million households, Verma believes success will depend on balancing science with accessibility, and credibility with convenience.

Because in a market where attention is fragmented, content is abundant, and trust is increasingly fragile, the real differentiator may not be how loudly a brand speaks but how accurately and responsibly it does so.