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COMPETITIVE MARKETING STRATEGIES FOR CUSTOMER ACQUISITION IN TODAY'S MARKET: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF HALDIRAM'S AND BALAJI

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Abstract

The Indian snack food industry is one of the fastest-growing segments within the Fast-Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) sector, valued at over Rs. 50,000 crore and expanding at a Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) of approximately 10–12%. Within this competitive landscape, Haldiram's and Balaji Wafers stand out as two dominant players pursuing distinct yet overlapping marketing strategies to acquire and retain customers. This study conducts a comparative analysis of the competitive marketing strategies employed by both brands for customer acquisition in today's dynamic marketplace. A primary survey was conducted with a sample size of 120 respondents drawn from urban and semi-urban regions across India using purposive and stratified random sampling. Structured questionnaires, in-depth interviews, and observational techniques were deployed. Findings reveal that Haldiram's relies heavily on brand heritage, premium positioning, wide product portfolio, and national-level advertising, while Balaji leverages aggressive price competition, regional dominance (particularly in Gujarat and Maharashtra), strong distributor networks, and value-for-money propositions. Both brands are increasingly investing in digital marketing and e-commerce channels. The study concludes with strategic recommendations to enhance customer acquisition efficacy for both organizations.

Keywords: *Competitive Marketing, Customer Acquisition, Haldiram's, Balaji Wafers, FMCG, Snack Food Industry, Brand Strategy, Consumer Behaviour, Price Strategy, Digital Marketing.*

1. INTRODUCTION

India's snacking culture has evolved dramatically over the past two decades, driven by rising disposable incomes, rapid urbanization, changing dietary habits, and a growing young population. The organized snack food market, which was once dominated by unbranded local players, is now witnessing fierce competition among well-established national and regional brands. Among these, Haldiram's and Balaji Wafers have emerged as iconic names that command significant shelf space, consumer mindshare, and market share.

Customer acquisition — the process of attracting and converting new consumers into buying customers — has become a strategic battleground for FMCG companies. In an era defined by digital disruption, price sensitivity, and heightened consumer awareness, brands must continuously innovate their marketing approaches to remain relevant and grow their customer base. This research paper investigates how Haldiram's and Balaji approach the challenge of customer acquisition through comparative analysis of their product, pricing, place, promotion, and digital strategies.

1.1 Background of Haldiram's

Founded in 1937 by Shri Ganga Bishan Agarwal in Bikaner, Rajasthan, Haldiram's has grown from a small sweet shop to one of India's most recognizable FMCG conglomerates. With an annual revenue exceeding Rs. 10,000 crore (as of 2023), the brand offers an extensive portfolio encompassing namkeens, sweets, ready-to-eat meals, beverages, and frozen food. Haldiram's operates across multiple business verticals including retail, restaurants, and exports to over 80 countries. The brand's equity is built on decades of trust, consistent product quality, and authentic Indian flavours.

1.2 Background of Balaji Wafers

Balaji Wafers Pvt. Ltd., established in 1974 in Rajkot, Gujarat, has grown into India's largest potato chips manufacturer by volume. With revenues of approximately Rs. 4,500 crore, Balaji commands over 65% market share in the Gujarat snack food market and a growing presence across Maharashtra, Rajasthan, and other western states. Known for its 'value-for-money' philosophy, Balaji differentiates itself through aggressive pricing, wider grammage, and an efficient supply chain. The Virani family-led enterprise deliberately avoided national television advertising for many years, instead focusing on grassroots and below-the-line marketing.

1.3 Research Objectives

The study pursues the following objectives: (1) To study and compare the marketing strategies of Haldiram's and Balaji for customer acquisition; (2) To analyse consumer perceptions, preferences, and purchase behaviour towards both brands; (3) To identify key factors influencing brand choice in the competitive snack food market; (4) To evaluate the effectiveness of digital marketing and promotional tools used by both brands; and (5) To provide strategic recommendations for enhancing customer acquisition for both organizations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Competitive Marketing Strategy

Porter (1980) introduced the concept of competitive advantage through cost leadership, differentiation, and focus strategies. In the FMCG context, Kotler and Keller (2016) emphasize that sustainable competitive advantage is increasingly achieved through superior customer understanding, brand building, and integrated marketing communication. Competitive marketing strategy encompasses all decisions related to segmentation, targeting, positioning (STP), and the marketing mix (4Ps/7Ps).

2.2 Customer Acquisition in FMCG

Blattberg and Deighton (1996) distinguished customer acquisition from customer retention, arguing that acquisition costs must be weighed against lifetime customer value. In the Indian FMCG sector, Srinivasan et al. (2018) found that price, availability, and brand familiarity are the top three drivers of first-time purchase in food categories. Kumar (2020) noted that digital marketing platforms have significantly reduced the cost of customer acquisition for regional FMCG brands.

2.3 Pricing and Value Perception

Monroe (1990) posited that perceived value equals perceived quality divided by perceived price. In the context of Indian snack foods, Verma and Sharma (2021) established that value-for-money is the primary acquisition driver in tier-2 and tier-3 cities, where Balaji's strategy of offering larger pack sizes at competitive prices has proven particularly effective. Conversely, Haldiram's premium pricing is justified through superior perceived quality and brand heritage.

2.4 Digital Marketing and E-Commerce in FMCG

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated FMCG brands' shift toward digital marketing and direct-to-consumer (D2C) e-commerce channels. According to Bain & Company (2022), Indian FMCG digital commerce grew at 45% CAGR between 2020 and 2022. Mehta (2022) documented that brands investing in social media engagement and influencer marketing achieved 30% higher customer acquisition rates compared to traditional ATL-only approaches.

2.5 Regional vs. National Brand Dynamics

Jain and Agrawal (2019) studied the competitive dynamics between national and regional FMCG brands in India, finding that regional brands enjoy a 'local trust premium' that translates into higher brand loyalty in home geographies. Balaji's dominance in Gujarat and western India is a textbook case of regional brand strength, while Haldiram's pan-India and global presence represents a national brand's scale advantage.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a descriptive cum analytical research design, combining quantitative survey data with qualitative insights from in-depth interviews and secondary data analysis. The mixed-methods approach ensures both breadth of coverage and depth of understanding.

3.2 Sampling

A sample size of 120 respondents was selected using stratified random sampling to ensure representation across demographic groups.

Stratum	Criteria	Count	% of Sample
Urban Consumers	Metro & Tier-1 cities	48	40%
Semi-Urban Consumers	Tier-2 & Tier-3 cities	42	35%
Rural Consumers	Village/panchayat areas	18	15%
Trade Channel Partners	Retailers & distributors	12	10%
Total	–	120	100%

Table 1: Sampling Framework

3.3 Data Collection Tools

Structured Questionnaire: A 35-item Likert-scale (1–5) survey covering brand awareness, purchase drivers, price sensitivity, and digital engagement. In-Depth Interviews: Semi-structured interviews with 15 key informants including brand managers, retailers, and consumers. Observation: In-store audits across 20 retail outlets in 4 cities. Secondary Data: Annual reports, industry databases (Euromonitor, Nielsen), and published research.

3.4 Data Analysis

Quantitative data was analysed using SPSS v26. Statistical tools employed include descriptive statistics, frequency distribution, cross-tabulation, chi-square tests, ANOVA, and factor analysis. A five-point Likert scale was used for attitudinal measurements. Reliability was confirmed with Cronbach's Alpha = 0.847, indicating high internal consistency.

3.5 Respondent Profile

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (n=120)	Percentage
Gender	Male	68	56.7%
	Female	50	41.7%
	Other / Prefer not to say	2	1.6%
Age Group	18–25 years	35	29.2%
	26–35 years	38	31.7%
	36–45 years	27	22.5%
	46+ years	20	16.6%
Monthly Income	Below Rs. 20,000	22	18.3%
	Rs. 20,001–40,000	38	31.7%
	Rs. 40,001–70,000	35	29.2%
	Above Rs. 70,000	25	20.8%
Location	Urban	48	40%
	Semi-Urban	42	35%
	Rural	18	15%
	Trade Respondents	12	10%

Table 2: Demographic Profile of Respondents (n=120)

4. COMPARATIVE MARKETING ANALYSIS

4.1 Product Strategy

Haldiram's offers an extraordinarily diverse product portfolio of over 400 SKUs spanning namkeens, sweets, papads, ready-to-eat meals, beverages, dairy, and frozen foods. This breadth allows the brand to cater to diverse taste preferences, occasions, and consumer segments. Regular product innovation — including health-oriented variants, regional taste adaptations, and festive special editions — reinforces customer engagement and repeat purchase.

Balaji, by contrast, pursues depth over breadth with a focused portfolio of approximately 80 SKUs, predominantly in potato-based snacks, extruded snacks, and wafers. Balaji's strength lies in product consistency, recognisable flavours tailored to western Indian palates, and continuous pack-size optimization to meet diverse consumption occasions.

Dimension	Haldiram's	Balaji Wafers
Portfolio Size	400+ SKUs	~80 SKUs
Core Categories	Namkeen, Sweets, RTE, Beverages, Frozen	Chips, Wafers, Extruded Snacks
Innovation Rate	High – quarterly launches	Moderate – selective launches
Health Variants	Baked, Low-Salt, Multigrain options	Limited health range
Packaging	Premium, Recyclable, Gift packs	Value-focused, functional packs
Regional Variants	Pan-India + 80+ export markets	Western India focused

Table 3: Product Strategy Comparison

4.2 Pricing Strategy

Pricing is arguably the most significant differentiator between the two brands. Haldiram's employs a premium pricing strategy, positioning its products 15–30% higher than comparable Balaji offerings. This premium is justified through brand equity, superior packaging, and perceived quality. Haldiram's pricing targets middle-to-upper-income urban consumers willing to pay for trusted quality.

Balaji adopts an economy/value pricing strategy, deliberately offering larger quantities at prices equal to or below competitors. The philosophy of providing more value for money reflects their commitment to accessibility. Balaji's Rs. 5 and Rs. 10 price points are strategically engineered to penetrate rural and semi-urban markets.

Price Point	Haldiram's Grammage	Balaji Grammage	Price Advantage
Rs. 5	15g	20g	Balaji +33%
Rs. 10	30g	45g	Balaji +50%
Rs. 20	55g	90g	Balaji +64%
Rs. 30	80g	130g	Balaji +63%
Rs. 50	135g	200g	Balaji +48%

Table 4: Price-Grammage Comparison (Potato Chips / Namkeen)

4.3 Distribution and Place Strategy

Haldiram's distribution network spans over 1 million retail touch-points across India and 80+ export markets, supported by 20+ manufacturing plants and company-owned restaurants. The brand maintains a strong presence in modern trade (supermarkets, hypermarkets), e-commerce platforms (Amazon, Flipkart, BigBasket, Blinkit), and institutional channels.

Balaji's distribution is highly efficient within its core geography. With 45 depots, 750+ distributors, and over 600,000 retail outlets in Gujarat alone, Balaji achieves unmatched penetration in its stronghold. The brand is rapidly expanding to Maharashtra, Rajasthan, and other states. Balaji's transportation fleet of 900+ owned trucks gives it a significant cost and speed advantage in distribution.

4.4 Promotion and Advertising Strategy

Haldiram's invests heavily in above-the-line (ATL) advertising through national television, print media, outdoor advertising, and celebrity endorsements. Annual marketing spend is estimated at Rs. 500–700 crore. The brand consistently builds emotional connect through campaigns celebrating Indian festivals, family bonding, and cultural traditions.

Balaji historically avoided national TV advertising, preferring below-the-line (BTL) approaches such as trade promotions, consumer schemes, retail visibility, and word-of-mouth. However, since 2020, Balaji has increased its ATL spend with regional language advertising in Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Rajasthan.

4.5 Digital Marketing Strategy

Digital Channel	Haldiram's Approach	Balaji Approach
Instagram	4.2M followers, daily posts, brand storytelling	1.8M followers, product focus
YouTube	Recipe videos, behind-the-scenes, 1.1M subscribers	Product launches, 320K subscribers
Facebook	Active community management, 8M+ likes	Regional language content, 2.4M likes
E-Commerce	Rs. 500 Cr+ online sales, own D2C website	Listed on major platforms, growing
Influencer Marketing	Food bloggers, fitness influencers	Regional YouTubers
App / Loyalty	Haldiram's app, loyalty rewards	No dedicated loyalty program

Table 5: Digital Marketing Strategy Comparison

5. DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

5.1 Brand Awareness (n=120)

Awareness Type	Haldiram's	Balaji	Both Brands
Unaided Brand Recall	96 (80.0%)	84 (70.0%)	80 (66.7%)
Aided Brand Recall	120 (100%)	115 (95.8%)	115 (95.8%)
Top-of-Mind (First Recall)	78 (65%)	42 (35%)	–
Digital Brand Awareness	88 (73.3%)	62 (51.7%)	–

Table 6: Brand Awareness – Haldiram's vs. Balaji

5.2 Purchase Driver Analysis

Respondents rated key purchase drivers on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Not important, 5 = Extremely important). The results reveal significant differences in what drives trial and repeat purchase for each brand:

Purchase Driver	Haldiram's Mean	Balaji Mean	Difference
Brand Reputation / Trust	4.52	3.78	+0.74 (Haldiram's favoured)
Price / Value for Money	3.21	4.68	+1.47 (Balaji favoured)
Taste / Flavour Quality	4.45	4.31	+0.14 (Haldiram's favoured)
Product Variety	4.38	3.12	+1.26 (Haldiram's favoured)
Availability / Accessibility	3.87	4.42	+0.55 (Balaji favoured)
Packaging Appeal	4.12	3.25	+0.87 (Haldiram's favoured)
Peer / Family Recommendation	3.98	4.15	+0.17 (Balaji favoured)
Social Media Influence	3.45	2.88	+0.57 (Haldiram's favoured)

Table 7: Purchase Driver Analysis (Likert Mean Scores, n=120)

5.3 Consumer Preference by Demographics

By Age: Younger consumers (18–35) showed stronger preference for Haldiram's due to brand visibility on social media and product variety. Older consumers (36+) preferred Balaji citing familiarity, taste, and value. Chi-square test confirmed statistical significance (chi-square = 14.32, df=3, $p<0.05$).

By Income: Consumers earning below Rs. 40,000/month preferred Balaji (71% of this segment), while those above Rs. 40,000/month preferred Haldiram's (68%). This validates the premium vs. economy positioning strategies.

By Location: Urban respondents preferred Haldiram's (72%), while semi-urban and rural respondents preferred Balaji (63%) owing to wider availability and competitive pricing.

5.4 Channel Preference for Purchase

Purchase Channel	Haldiram's Users	Balaji Users
Local Kirana Store	42%	68%
Supermarket / Modern Trade	35%	18%
E-Commerce (Amazon, BigBasket, etc.)	14%	6%
Company Website / App	5%	2%

Haldiram's Restaurant / Outlet	4%	–
Other / Multiple Channels	–	6%

Table 8: Preferred Purchase Channels

5.5 Customer Acquisition Triggers

Acquisition Trigger	Haldiram's (n=55 new buyers)	Balaji (n=42 new buyers)
TV / OOH Advertisement	28%	12%
In-Store Display / Promotion	18%	34%
Word of Mouth	16%	28%
Social Media / Influencer	22%	10%
E-Commerce Recommendation	12%	6%
Price Offer / Scheme	4%	10%

Table 9: Primary Customer Acquisition Triggers

5.6 Net Promoter Score (NPS)

Respondents were asked: 'How likely are you to recommend this brand to friends and family?' (scale of 0–10). NPS = % Promoters (9–10) minus % Detractors (0–6).

Brand	Promoters (9-10)	Passives (7-8)	Detractors (0-6)	NPS Score
Haldiram's	52%	32%	16%	+36
Balaji Wafers	44%	36%	20%	+24

Table 10: Net Promoter Score Comparison

6. SWOT ANALYSIS

6.1 SWOT – Haldiram's

Strengths	Weaknesses
Strong pan-India and global brand recognition	Premium pricing limits reach in rural markets
Diverse product portfolio (400+ SKUs)	Relatively higher cost structure
High brand trust and heritage (since 1937)	Less competitive in economy segment
Superior packaging and product quality	Slower supply chain for perishable items
Robust digital presence and e-commerce	Dependent on few manufacturing hubs

Table 11a: Strengths and Weaknesses – Haldiram's

Opportunities	Threats
Rising health consciousness – premium healthy snacks	Intensifying competition from Balaji, ITC, PepsiCo
Expansion into tier-2/3 cities and rural markets	Commodity price fluctuations (potato, edible oils)
Exports and global Indian diaspora targeting	Private label growth in modern trade
Restaurant franchise model expansion	Counterfeit and imitation products
D2C e-commerce and subscription models	Regulatory changes (FSSAI, GST)

Table 11b: Opportunities and Threats – Haldiram's

6.2 SWOT – Balaji Wafers

Strengths	Weaknesses
Market leader in Gujarat/West India by volume	Limited pan-India brand recognition
Aggressive value-for-money pricing	Narrower product portfolio
Highly efficient distribution network	Limited health/wellness offerings
Strong retailer and distributor loyalty	Weak digital and social media presence
Low-cost manufacturing with owned transport fleet	Geographic concentration risk

Table 12a: Strengths and Weaknesses – Balaji Wafers

Opportunities	Threats
Expansion into North and South India markets	Haldiram's competing in value segment
Product line extension – healthy snacks, RTE meals	Rising raw material costs
Digital commerce and app-based ordering	PepsiCo (Lay's) and ITC (Bingo) competition
Co-branding and institutional supply	Counterfeit products in unorganised markets
Export opportunities to Middle East, Africa	Shifting consumer preference toward healthier options

Table 12b: Opportunities and Threats – Balaji Wafers

7. KEY FINDINGS SUMMARY

Brand Awareness: Haldiram's enjoys significantly higher unaided recall (80%) and Top-of-Mind awareness (65%) compared to Balaji (70% unaided; 35% top-of-mind). Price Sensitivity: Price is the primary purchase driver for Balaji consumers (mean = 4.68), while brand trust dominates for Haldiram's (mean = 4.52), confirming each brand's positioning strategy. Digital Penetration: Haldiram's digital marketing is more developed (73.3% digital awareness vs 51.7% for Balaji), contributing to higher acquisition through social media (22% vs 10%). Distribution Strength: Balaji outperforms Haldiram's in accessibility scores in semi-urban and rural markets, with 68% of Balaji buyers purchasing from local kirana stores. Customer Acquisition: Haldiram's primary triggers are advertising (28%) and social media (22%), while Balaji relies more on in-store promotions (34%) and word-of-mouth (28%). NPS and Loyalty:

Haldiram's records a higher Net Promoter Score (+36 vs +24), indicating stronger brand advocacy. Demographic Patterns: Income and geographic location are the strongest predictors of brand preference. Product Innovation: Consumers rate Haldiram's significantly higher on product variety and packaging, while Balaji leads on value-for-money perception.

8. STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS

8.1 Recommendations for Haldiram's

Price Architecture Diversification: Introduce an economy sub-brand or value pack range targeting Rs. 5–Rs. 20 price points to compete in tier-3/rural markets without diluting the premium brand image.

Rural Distribution Expansion: Invest in last-mile distribution infrastructure (hub-and-spoke model) to improve kirana penetration in eastern and rural India.

Health and Wellness Portfolio: Accelerate launch of baked, multigrain, low-calorie, and fortified snack variants to capture health-conscious millennials and Gen-Z consumers.

Digital Commerce Acceleration: Strengthen D2C platform, introduce subscription meal boxes, and leverage WhatsApp commerce for bulk orders and loyalty engagement.

Influencer Micro-Marketing: Partner with regional micro-influencers (50K–500K followers) in tier-2 cities to drive authentic word-of-mouth beyond metro audiences.

Festive and Occasion Marketing: Develop hyper-personalised festive packs and gifting solutions through digital channels, creating new acquisition occasions.

8.2 Recommendations for Balaji Wafers

National Brand Building: Increase ATL advertising spend on national television and OTT platforms to build brand recognition beyond western India.

Product Portfolio Expansion: Diversify beyond chips/wafers into namkeens, healthy snacks, and ready-to-eat categories to reduce category concentration risk.

Digital Transformation: Invest in a comprehensive digital marketing strategy including content creation, social media management, e-commerce marketplace optimization, and loyalty programs.

Premium Sub-Brand: Introduce a premium product line with superior ingredients, enhanced packaging, and health positioning to capture aspirational consumers.

Export Strategy: Leverage existing manufacturing efficiency to enter export markets — particularly the Middle East, UK, and USA — targeting the large Indian diaspora.

Modern Trade Penetration: Develop a dedicated modern trade strategy (planogram optimization, category management) to improve shelf presence in hypermarkets and supermarkets.

9. CONCLUSION

This comparative study of the competitive marketing strategies of Haldiram's and Balaji Wafers, based on a survey of 120 respondents, reveals that both brands have carved distinct competitive positions in the Indian snack food market through carefully differentiated approaches to the marketing mix. Haldiram's brand equity, extensive product range, and digital sophistication give it a formidable competitive advantage in urban and premium segments. Balaji's relentless focus on value pricing, distribution efficiency, and regional brand loyalty makes it a dominant force in cost-sensitive markets.

The research demonstrates that there is no singular 'best' strategy for customer acquisition — effectiveness is contingent on target segment, geography, income level, and brand lifecycle stage. Both brands would benefit from learning from each other: Haldiram's must strengthen value proposition and rural reach; Balaji must invest in brand building and portfolio diversification to compete at a national scale.

As India's snack food market continues its robust growth trajectory, the brands that successfully integrate digital marketing, data-driven consumer insights, and sustainable product innovation into their customer acquisition strategies will achieve enduring competitive advantage. This study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on competitive marketing in emerging FMCG markets and offers actionable frameworks for practitioners and researchers alike.

10. LIMITATIONS AND SCOPE FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

10.1 Limitations

The sample of 120 respondents, while sufficient for the study's scope, may limit generalizability across all Indian states and demographic groups. Self-reporting bias in questionnaire responses may affect the accuracy of purchase driver ratings. The study focuses on a specific time period (January–March 2025) and may not capture seasonal variations in purchase behaviour. Secondary data on exact marketing spend and financial metrics is based on estimated industry figures, as detailed proprietary data is not publicly disclosed.

10.2 Scope for Future Research

Future research directions include: a longitudinal study tracking brand equity and customer acquisition metrics over 3–5 years; experimental studies measuring direct ROI of digital vs. traditional marketing spend for FMCG brands; a cross-cultural study comparing snack brand acquisition strategies across South Asian markets; and analysis of the impact of private labels and D2C brands on established FMCG customer acquisition.

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