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Foam, sweet foam

 Shamni Pande | [Print Edition: June 10, 2012](#)

The irony is inescapable. The third generation of a family whose Sikh faith forbids them from shaving owns Vi-John, one of the country's biggest selling shaving product brands, launched in 1960.

Read how Indian brands pose stiff challenge for MNCs

Bhupinder Singh Kochar recalls that as an eight-year-old, he would hover around his father, the late Suchet Singh Kochar, who launched a personal care business from his home in Delhi's Chandni Chowk. Kochar remembers how excited he was when the house filled up with packages of fragrant hair oil, talcum powder and cream. Today, as Managing Director of the diversified Vi-John Group of companies, the 60-year-old Kochar is the only survivor of the second generation. "My father slogged round the clock," he says. "He used to go to Sadar Bazar to sell his products, sometimes on kerbs, even on Sundays."

THE LOW-DOWN

Vi-John started in an Old Delhi home in 1960
It got an English-sounding name because of the craze for imports
It is now managed by the third generation
It sells in the north, west and east, and is eyeing the south

The break came when Suchet Singh came up with a formulation for a shaving cream. He decided to call it Vi-John. "He felt an English-sounding name would work, as there was a craze for imported goods that sold at high prices," says Kochar.

Suchet Singh's hunch was right. Vi-John's success led him to register his enterprise as Kochar Cosmetics. He set up four factories on GT Karnal Road between 1978 and 2002, which cranked out up to 700,000 units a day. In 2004, the family shifted manufacturing to Baddi, Himachal Pradesh, and split the **fast-moving consumer goods** (FMCG) business into two divisions - called Maja Personal Care and Maja Healthcare. These two divisions make 15 products and

125 stock-keeping units. The Vi-John brand includes shaving cream, shaving foam and gel, hair removal cream, fairness cream, skin cream, almond hair oil, talcum powder and toothpaste. The company also makes deodorant and perfume, branded Cobra and Archies.

SUCCESS STORY OF OTHER DESI BRANDS

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"They have products for every need, their quality is good and they are affordable, but most importantly they market them well and give us the maximum discounts," says Virinder Kumar Garg, who manages distribution for R.K. Agencies in Rampur, Uttar Pradesh. The agency has dealt with the company for eight years, and also handles distribution for other FMCG companies such as L'Oreal, CavinKare and Emami. Many in the Vi-John distribution chain say retailers get margins of up to 25 per cent on the maximum retail price.

Thanks to aggressive pricing, Vi-John has a turnover of Rs 250 crore. It has extended distribution from northern India to the east and some regions of the west, with 2,500 distributors covering 300,000 retail outlets. "Our target is to cover 700,000 outlets in a year, with at least 3,500 distributors, and we are making a beginning in the south as well," says Vimal Pande, CEO, Vi-John. He joined the company late last year, and has previously worked with SC Johnson, the company that markets AllOut mosquito repellent, PepsiCo India and Emami.

"With our growth, we want good people," says Director Harshit Kochar, a third-generation member of the founding family who also oversees the business, particularly marketing and sales.

The Vi-John Group recently recruited senior management talent including its National Sales Manager Jagdish Malwani, who previously worked with SC Johnson, chewing gum and candy maker Wrigley, and Marico. It also roped in Ravinder Rote as Vice President - Operations. Rote worked with Emami and Bio Veda Action Research, which owns the Biotique brand.

VIDEO: Interview with Harshit Kochar

All this points to a bigger game plan. "We are eager for inorganic growth and are scouting the market to acquire brands that can take us forward," says Harshit. It is not surprising, then, that private equity investors are knocking on Vi-John's door. The company is in no hurry. Harshit says: "We will consider the option only when we have firmed up our acquisition target. We are also considering an IPO in the next three years."