

How Global Brands **Win in India**

A framework for advertising strategy in high-complexity markets.
Drawn from original qualitative research on 11 brand campaigns
across three IR strategy types in the Indian retail sector.

— WHY STANDARD FRAMEWORKS BREAK DOWN

India is not a harder version of a Western market. It is a structurally different one.

Most brand strategy frameworks were designed for markets where consumer behaviour is relatively homogeneous, media is consolidated, and trust infrastructure (reviews, retail presence, brand history) is already in place. Brands enter with a playbook. They adjust the language. They adapt the visual. They run the campaign.

In India, this sequence consistently underperforms. Not because the execution is poor, but because the underlying assumptions do not hold.

Three variables shift fundamentally in the Indian market: the cost of building consumer trust from scratch, the fragmentation of cultural and linguistic context across regions, and the ratio between what a signal costs to produce and how reliably it reaches its intended audience.

A campaign that performs efficiently in a consolidated Western market may require three to five times the signalling investment to achieve equivalent cut-through in India, not because the creative is weaker, but because the environment absorbs and distorts signals differently.

The second problem is structural. Most brand strategy frameworks treat global integration and local responsiveness as a dial, something to be calibrated. In practice, a brand's position on that dial determines its entire signalling architecture, what it says, where it says it, what it costs, and how much of it lands.




The core insight of this framework: a brand's IR position is not just a business strategy variable. It determines the entire architecture of how that brand must communicate to be trusted in a new, high-complexity market.

This framework uses original research from 11 advertising campaigns across the Indian retail sector to map what that architecture looks like for each type of brand, and what it takes to make it work.

— THE IR-SIGNALLING MATRIX

Three brand types. Three signalling architectures.

The framework maps brand types against two axes: global integration and local responsiveness. Each position demands a fundamentally different approach to advertising in India.

<p>HIGH GLOBAL INTEGRATION · LOW LOCAL RESPONSIVENESS</p> <p>Global: The Standardised Signal</p>  <p>Uses universal aspiration and high-budget production as quality signals. English-led, minimal cultural adaptation. Consistent global identity is the strategy.</p> <p>AUDIT SCORE RANGE</p> <p>7-14</p> <p>Global consistency · Universal aspirational themes</p>	<p>BALANCED INTEGRATION AND RESPONSIVENESS</p> <p>Transnational: The Dual Signal Strategy</p>  <p>Runs global brand consistency and local cultural relevance in parallel. Global signals carry identity. Local signals carry trust. The failure mode is letting one undermine the other.</p> <p>AUDIT SCORE RANGE</p> <p>15-24</p> <p>Dual-layer signalling · Global identity meets local relevance</p>	<p>HIGH LOCAL RESPONSIVENESS · LOWER GLOBAL INTEGRATION</p> <p>Multinational: Deep Local Architecture</p>  <p>Prioritises cultural fluency and regional languages over global consistency. The Indian home is the primary anchor signal. Trust is built through deep local integration.</p> <p>AUDIT SCORE RANGE</p> <p>25-35</p> <p>High local trust · Brand acts as a local entity</p>
<p>STRATEGIC PRINCIPLES FOR THE INDIAN MARKET</p> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between;"> <div data-bbox="135 1332 558 1489"> <p>Localisation is trust infrastructure</p> <p>Not mere translation. The delivery of locally meaningful context that makes a signal credible.</p> </div> <div data-bbox="582 1332 1005 1456"> <p>The home as the anchor signal</p> <p>Domestic life is the most reliable cultural anchor for building trust across all categories.</p> </div> <div data-bbox="1029 1332 1452 1456"> <p>Separate the signal layers</p> <p>In dual strategies, global and local elements must coexist structurally without undermining each other.</p> </div> </div>		

The following pages examine each brand type in detail, including the specific signalling variables that determine effectiveness in the Indian market.

HIGH GLOBAL INTEGRATION · LOW LOCAL RESPONSIVENESS

Standardised signal. Universal aspiration.

Global brands operating in India run largely the same advertising they run everywhere. The logic is deliberate: the brand's position in the category, not its cultural fluency, is the primary purchase driver. The product is aspirational. The signal is universal. Consistency is the strategy.

01

High Signal Cost

Production quality is exceptionally high. The cost of the signal is itself a quality cue. Low-budget execution would contradict the brand's positioning.

02

Universal Language

English-led. Internationally recognisable language. Feature-forward communication. Minimal cultural or regional adaptation in copy or casting.

03

Diverse but Generic Cast

Multicultural casting signals global inclusion but stops short of specific cultural representation. The intention is to belong everywhere, not somewhere specific.

WHAT WORKS

In categories where aspiration is the primary purchase driver, standardised global signals perform well in India. The product category does the cultural work. The brand simply needs to be globally legible and consistently presented. Reducing localisation also reduces cost and production complexity.

WHERE IT BREAKS DOWN

Global standardisation struggles in categories where consumer trust requires cultural familiarity, where price sensitivity is high, or where purchasing decisions involve family or community input. In these contexts, a signal that belongs everywhere is trusted nowhere specifically.

Key signal variable: Observability. Global brands invest heavily in making their signals impossible to miss, through scale, production quality, and media reach. The signal may not resonate culturally, but it is designed to register everywhere it lands.

BALANCED INTEGRATION AND RESPONSIVENESS

Dual signalling. The hardest architecture to get right.

Transnational brands in India must run two signals simultaneously. The first maintains global brand recognition, the logos, colour systems, and category ownership that make the brand legible internationally. The second builds local cultural trust, through language, celebrity, food, custom, and community.

The failure mode is not running one signal or the other. The failure mode is letting one undermine the other. A brand that localises too aggressively begins to look unfamiliar globally. A brand that leans too hard on global consistency looks disconnected locally.

The research finding: The most effective transnational campaigns in India treat global and local signals as structurally separate. Global signals carry the brand's identity and quality promise. Local signals carry the cultural trust and emotional relevance. They run in parallel, not in competition.

WHAT EFFECTIVE DUAL SIGNALLING LOOKS LIKE

GLOBAL SIGNAL LAYER

Brand marks, colour systems, global slogans, product quality claims, internationally recognised visual language. These do not change by market.

LOCAL SIGNAL LAYER

Regional celebrities, local language, culturally specific food or product variants, references to local customs and family dynamics. These are built market-by-market.

THE CELEBRITY MECHANISM

The research found consistent use of locally significant celebrities as the primary bridge between global and local signal layers. A nationally recognised figure does not replace the global brand signal; they act as a credibility transfer agent, borrowing cultural trust and lending it to the brand. The choice of celebrity, their regional reach, cultural associations, and audience profile, is as strategic as any media decision.

Bilingual execution matters: Campaigns that use a combination of English and regional language (Hindi, Telugu, Kannada, Tamil) within the same ad consistently showed higher cultural trust signals than single-language executions. The language choice signals which consumer the brand is actually speaking to.

HIGH LOCAL RESPONSIVENESS · LOWER GLOBAL INTEGRATION

Deep local architecture. The home as the anchor signal.

Multinational brands in India make a deliberate strategic choice: local cultural relevance takes priority over global brand consistency. The brand is present globally, but in each market it behaves like a local. This is not a compromise. It is the strategy.

The research identified a consistent pattern in how high-performing multinational brands build cultural trust in India. The home, specifically the Indian home as a concept, emerges as the most reliable cultural anchor. Family relationships, shared domestic space, practical daily needs, and the emotional weight of the household as a unit of meaning, all function as primary signal carriers.

The home-as-anchor insight: Advertising that places the product in the context of the Indian household does not just demonstrate use-case relevance. It signals that the brand understands the structure of Indian domestic life, which is a materially different cultural proposition from demonstrating product features.

SIGNALLING CHARACTERISTICS

01

Regional Language Priority

Hindi, regional languages, and Hinglish as the primary communication register. English appears in product labels and CTAs, not in narrative.

02

Local Cast and Setting

Indian families in Indian homes. Recognisable domestic settings. The production aesthetic deliberately mirrors real Indian interiors, not aspirational ones.

03

Lower Signal Cost

Single location shoots. No international celebrities. Production quality is good but not cinematic. The simplicity is itself a local trust signal.

THE TRADE-OFF

Deep localisation builds strong trust within specific cultural contexts but creates a more fragmented global brand identity. For brands where local market penetration is the primary commercial objective, this is an acceptable and often optimal trade-off. For brands managing global brand equity simultaneously, it requires careful governance to prevent local executions from diluting the broader brand architecture.

— SIGNAL STRATEGY SELF-ASSESSMENT

Where is your signalling strategy actually built for?

Use this grid to assess your current advertising approach against the framework. Score each variable 1 (strongly global) to 5 (strongly local). Your total score indicates your current IR signalling position and whether it is aligned with your stated market strategy.

SIGNAL VARIABLE	1 (GLOBAL)	3 (TRANSNATIONAL)	5 (LOCAL)	YOUR SCORE
Language used in creative	English only	English + regional	Regional primary	/5
Casting in campaign	Global diverse	Local celebrity	Local everyday cast	/5
Setting and environment	Neutral / global	Mixed	Distinctly Indian	/5
Product variant localisation	Same globally	Locally adapted	Built for market	/5
Cultural references in narrative	Universal themes	Selective local cues	Deep cultural embed	/5
Production scale and cost	Very high	High	Moderate	/5
Brand mark prominence	Dominant	Balanced	Subordinate to story	/5

SCORE 7 TO 14

Global Architecture

Optimised for global consistency. Works well in aspirational categories. Review for local trust gaps in community-driven purchase decisions.

SCORE 15 TO 24

Transnational Zone

Dual signal territory. Assess whether global and local layers are structurally separated or creating noise for each other.

SCORE 25 TO 35

Local Architecture

High local trust potential. Verify that global brand equity is not being diluted across markets through inconsistent local execution.

— DISTILLED FROM ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Six principles that apply regardless of IR position.

1 Your IR position determines your signalling architecture, not just your product strategy.

Before deciding what to say in a market, establish where your brand sits on the integration-responsiveness spectrum. The answer changes the entire communication system, not just the copy.

2 Localisation is not translation. It is trust infrastructure.

Changing the language of an ad is the minimum viable action. Building genuine cultural trust requires the signal to carry locally meaningful context, not just locally readable text.

3 In transnational strategy, run global and local signals in parallel, not in competition.

The failure mode is not choosing the wrong signal. It is designing an ad where the global and local elements fight for dominance. Structurally separate them. Each layer should do its own job cleanly.

4 Signal cost is itself a signal.

The production quality of an ad communicates brand intent before the content does. A high-production global brand running a low-budget local execution creates a trust contradiction. Match production investment to the brand position you are trying to occupy.

5 The home is the most reliable cultural anchor in the Indian market.

Across brand types and categories, advertising that connects to the Indian household, its structure, its relationships, its daily life, consistently demonstrates stronger cultural trust signals than advertising built around individual aspiration.

6 Misalignment between IR position and signalling strategy is a structural problem, not a creative one.

If your advertising is underperforming in a complex market, the most common root cause is not weak creative. It is a mismatch between the brand's stated market strategy and the signals its advertising is actually built to carry.

— PRACTITIONER AND RESEARCHER

Where this framework comes from.

This framework is drawn from original qualitative research conducted as part of an MSc in International Management at Cardiff University, completed in 2024. The research used the Gioia Methodology to analyse 11 advertising campaigns across three IR strategy categories in the Indian retail sector, applying Signalling Theory as the primary analytical lens.

The research was inductive and data-grounded. No prior hypothesis was imposed on the campaigns. The patterns documented in this framework emerged from the data through systematic open, second-order, and aggregate coding. The result is a grounded theory of how brand signalling strategy maps to IR positioning in a high-complexity market.

Pranjal Singh

Brand and Growth Marketer · FMCG, D2C, B2B SaaS

Pranjal Singh is a brand and growth marketer based in Gurugram, India, with experience across FMCG, D2C, and B2B SaaS. He holds an MSc in International Management from Cardiff University and an MBA from IMT Ghaziabad. His work spans integrated GTM strategy, brand architecture, performance marketing, and lifecycle systems.

This framework is a practitioner synthesis: academic rigour applied to real commercial problems in one of the world's most structurally distinct consumer markets.

A note on confidentiality: All brand examples referenced in the underlying research are drawn from publicly available advertising material. No proprietary commercial data from any employer or client has been used in this framework.

PS

Brand and growth marketing across FMCG, D2C, and B2B
SaaS. Built for the Indian market.

pranjalsingh.me

linkedin.com/in/pranjalsingh

Cardiff University MSc International Management · 2024

This document may be shared freely. It may not be reproduced or adapted without attribution.