

First 365 Days: Garima Singh on brewing business impact at United Breweries

Garima Singh isn't one to play it safe. After senior roles at PepsiCo, Hero MotoCorp, Mondelez Apple, she took on a new challenge in one of India's most complex industries – alcoholic beverages – as Chief Corporate Affairs Officer at United Breweries (UB). After a year in post, she says the role is a true test of business and leadership skills, and one she's proud to have taken on.

Choosing Challenge over Comfort

What drew Garima to the role at UB was how unfamiliar it was. “I had never worked in this sector before,” she says. “It's not the routine FMCG. In India, alcohol is a state subject, so you're dealing with 35 different legal entities. The complexity is immense and so is the learning opportunity. That really pulled me in.”

For many, the combination of regulatory hurdles and reputational challenges would be a deterrent – but Garima saw it as the ultimate proving ground. “For me, it wasn't a risk, it was a chance to test myself,” she explains. “This sector truly tests your skills; your management ability, your strategy, your mindset. And after a year, I can say that with even more conviction.”

Preparation and onboarding

Garima explains how she was able to get through the selection process at UB when she had no experience in the alco-bev sector. As a trained researcher, she is able to go deep on any subject and understand the issues inside out. “I always go through the website, the annual reports, the board composition, news items and watch video interviews with the CEO,” she says. “That gives you a sense of where the company is headed and what the challenges and big bets are.”



“Andrews Partnership had absolute clarity on what the role expectations were and they provided very crisp interview briefings, which were a great help,” she adds. Last but not least, prior experience with rigorous hiring processes at companies like Apple helped her prepare.

Once in post, onboarding was structured and deliberate. “HR did a fabulous job. For the first 20 to 25 days, they handled my calendar, setting up one-on-one meetings with the management team and sending reading materials,” she recalls. “I had time with the CEO, which helped me connect the dots between functional issues and the bigger picture.”

From function to business

Her onboarding experience gave her valuable exposure to the company’s inner workings, but Garima knew she’d need to go further. Her early focus at UB was on moving well beyond her functional remit to deeply understand the commercial levers of the business. “When I started managing larger teams in my career, I realised that having just a functional lens wasn’t enough,” she explains.

“You have to understand the business so you can put your efforts in the right place.”

That commercial fluency is something she now expects from her own team. “I’ve started inculcating this habit of ‘know your business’ even in the most junior team members,” she says. “I give them a business overview in our connects – operating profit, volume growth, cash flow. That way, they understand how their work contributes to the company’s success.”

It’s a lesson learned from experience. “In my early years, I wasn’t given that exposure and I want to change that. When people truly know how the business works, they value their contribution more and gain confidence.”

Embedding culture and growth

Those early conversations and deep dives helped Garima define a clear set of priorities for her first year. “The first was culture,” she says. “We’ve moved from being UB to being part of Heineken – so that shift in mindset and ways of working had to happen.”

Growth was the next focus, and not just in commercial terms, but delivering superior and balanced growth working through Heineken's EverGreen strategy. "The Heineken EverGreen strategy has been built on our value creation model, which we call the Green Diamond," explains Garima. "This value creation model puts growth, profit and capital on equal footing with sustainability and responsibility."

Twelve months in, Garima sees a clear sign of success in the way corporate affairs is perceived in the business. "If you attend a sales conference or a supply chain review, you'll hear people calling out the valued contribution of corporate affairs multiple times," she says. "It makes me feel proud that we're seen as equal partners across functions."

That visibility is no accident. Garima has made it a priority to build credibility and trust internally. "You can't lead corporate affairs unless you understand your internal stakeholders," she says. "You have to be embedded in the fabric of the business. Only then can you represent the company authentically to the outside world."

She believes strong internal relation-

ships are the foundation of external success. "When you help solve a problem for someone – when you create a regulatory unlock or support a business initiative – they come back to you," she says. "It becomes a virtuous cycle."

Looking ahead: sustainability and inclusion

In the year ahead, Garima sees growing the beer category as a key opportunity – and one with a strong social purpose.

Water and environmental sustainability are also high on her agenda. "Water is a key input in beer and carbon circularity is critical," she says. "A lot of work is already being driven by the plants, but I'll be spending more time supporting those initiatives."

She's also passionate about encouraging more women to consider roles in the sector. "In alco-bev, there are very few women – you can count them on your fingers," she says. "But this is a sector where you can really demonstrate your skills and add value to the business. The bigger the challenge, the bigger the opportunity."