



Investing in a priority target market: Combining sales, marketing and business support to attract and retain women customers

Case study: Husk

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Author acknowledgements:

- Daniela Santos & Gerardo Mejia (design)
- Gerbrich Salverda, Judith Rosenbrand, Jurgen Vermeulen, Susie Shuford (FMO)
- Rizul Choudhury, Subhendu Goswami, Shaila Lee, Faisal Imam (Husk team)

What you'll find inside

This case study describes strategies implemented by Husk Power Systems, a mini-grid provider with presence in India and Nigeria. In doing so, Husk both increased sales of energy units and electrical devices to women-led businesses and customers, as well as increasing the overall clean energy consumption of these customers. Husk achieved this through targeted market research, and a subsequent sales, marketing and training campaign. This case study describes both the approach and results, which include **increasing its women-led business customer base from 2% to 8% in one year**, and achieving a 94% retention rate of women-led business clients in the two months after implementing its new approach.

Is this case study for you?

This case study is relevant for enterprises interested in expanding their reach among women-led business customers through targeted marketing and sales strategies, as well as funders wishing to support such work.

Note that while this case study looks at a mini-grid company, the findings and recommendations are relevant to any mid- to large-sized organisation with a B2B customer offering.

We hope this case study sparks conversations within your organisation and provides a practical example of the benefits of investing in women and women-led businesses as a priority target market.

The context:

Powerful motivation for action

By 2030, an estimated 30 million women-owned micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) are expected to flourish in India¹, but inadequate access to reliable electricity is one of the biggest hurdles they face in prospering.² Mini-grids³ will be an important tool to solving such energy poverty: In fact, the World Bank and the International Energy Agency estimate that between 100,000 and 200,000 mini-grids will need to be built by 2030.⁴ Women-led businesses (WLBs) are an important and rapidly increasing market for mini-grids, as the number of WLBs had risen by 75% in 2022 alone.⁵ **Businesses are priority high-value customers for mini-grid providers**, and therefore it is strategically important to identify, reach and serve WLBs.

About Husk

US-headquartered Husk Power Systems (“Husk”) is the leading solar mini-grid developer and net-zero energy services provider in rural Asia and Africa. Founded in Bihar, India in 2008, Husk pioneered the mini-grid industry and remains a trailblazer. Its mission is to catalyse economic development and wealth creation for entire rural communities, including micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs), small factories, households, schools, health clinics and farmers. Illustrating its commitment to fostering revolutionary change in the energy landscape, Husk signed the UN Energy Compact in 2022, pledging to have a minimum of 5,000 mini-grids by 2030. At the heart of their operations is a sophisticated digital platform integrating cutting-edge technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), the Internet of Things (IoT), and smart metres. This tech-driven approach empowers the company to achieve highly efficient and automated management of its solar mini-grid assets.

At the time of writing, Husk is operating 188 solar mini-grids in India, and 12 in Nigeria, serving over 15,000 MSMEs, small factories, households, schools, health clinics, and farmers.⁶ At the start of 2023, Husk made headlines by becoming the first mini-grid company to achieve profitability globally.⁷

Social impacts and community linkages are important motivating factors for Husk’s leadership and team. For example, Husk is committed to providing electricity to schools and healthcare service providers, and creating meaningful jobs in the communities where they operate. As of 2022, Husk is also a signatory to the Gender and Energy Compact, and aims to ensure alignment with the 2X Challenge Criteria.⁸



“[An] aspect of our work is to create social connection. Thinking, how can we help entrepreneurs grow their businesses? Supporting them with electricity will allow the business to grow and then we think the relationship with us will be longer”

-Husk Management

“Energy plays a part in providing respite for women - we often see cooking and managing the household as role of the women; Husk provides 24/7 power - they can turn on our power at any time and put their lights on - this is important for women who don't go out of their household as much...”

-Husk Management

¹ Bhasin, Nidhi (2022), [“Catalyse Women Entrepreneurship in Rural India”](#). *BW Disrupt*.

² Waray, Sanchit, Sasmita Patnaik, and Abhishek Jain. (2018) [“Clean Energy Innovations to Boost Rural Incomes”](#). New Delhi: Council on Energy, Environment and Water.

³ A mini-grid is a stand-alone electricity generation source and distribution network, often powered by solar, hydro or wind energy. It delivers electricity to communities in locations where connection to the main grid network is inaccessible or prohibitively expensive. A mini-grid, also sometimes referred to as an “isolated grid”, comprises an electricity generation source (e.g., diesel, solar-hybrid, hydropower, or biomass), combined with an energy storage system (for example, battery storage) which is then connected to a distribution network supplying electricity to a localised group of customers. Mini-grids can range in size from micro (typically serving 20-100 customers) to full mini-grids (serving well over 500 customers). In rural settings, customers are typically individual households but may also include local businesses, as well as community facilities, such as churches, schools and health clinics. Figure above gives an overview of a mini-grid system and its related components including generation, operators and the applications for which the distributed electricity can be utilised. From: The World Bank (2017), [“Mini-grids & gender equality: Inclusive design, better development outcomes”](#).

⁴ Husk (2023). [“Rural minigrids will never be profitable”. Guess again! Husk Power proves industry doubters wrong, announces major milestone”](#).

⁵ Shetty, Sangita. (2022). [“Husk Power Systems and Smart Power India Launch “Pragati Ki Aur” Campaign to Boost Income of Solar-Powered, Women-Led MSMEs in Rural India”](#).

⁶ Husk (2022). [“2021 corporate results: Husk Power Systems revenue jumps 45%, with rapid Africa expansion, and robust pipeline of shovel-ready solar microgrids”](#).

⁷ Husk (2023). Energy Capital & Power (2023). [“Husk Power reaches minigrid profitability”](#).

⁸ Husk (2022)

The targets:

Reaching more women-led businesses (WLBs)

Despite a clear view on the untapped potential of WLBs as customers, and being motivated by achieving social impact as an organisation, Husk hadn't intentionally implemented many gender-inclusive market strategies, and realised that their reach among women customers was lagging: Husk estimated that only 2% of their customers were women or WLBs.⁹

Husk committed to increasing micro-grid connections and energy usage by women-led businesses (WLBs), based on the following observations:

- **The team recognised the growth opportunities in the untapped market of WLBs (as outlined above);**
- **The team perceived women and WLB customers as more loyal - measured by repeat sales and regular loan repayments.**

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“We want to increase the number of women-led businesses as customers. If we support them to grow, they can grow their business and then use more power from Husk. If we can demonstrate this, it will help us to create a business case; then in the newer sites, there will be a conscious effort in getting as many women customers as possible”

-Husk Management

In a project funded by FMO, in 2022 Husk embarked on a collaboration with Value for Women to make these ambitions a reality. This project focused on Husk's Indian operations - given that their Nigerian operations were much more nascent at the time.

⁹Exact sex-disaggregated customer data was not available; this is based on the Husk team's estimates.





The challenges: What was creating the gender gap

To identify why Husk India was not reaching and serving women customers, Value for Women conducted a gender diagnostic process. This consisted of interviews, organisational data review, and an assessment of organisational policies and processes.

We identified the following factors:

- **Husk India didn't sufficiently understand their women/ WLB customers. Among others, there was a lack of sex-disaggregated data on B2B sales.** The Husk sales data could be segmented by business type, but not by the gender of the business owners. This meant that Husk was not able to identify differences in their sales to women- versus men-led businesses. So, while Husk had tailored their sales strategies for different business types and sectors, **they weren't aware of gendered differences in needs and preferences.**
- Flowing from the lack of knowledge and understanding of women customers, **Husk lacked deliberate strategies to target women customers.** For example, all sales agents were men, whereas due to local norms, potential women customers might respond more positively to women sales agents.

This led to a six-month technical assistance process to implement a two-part strategy: First, to **increase understanding of women and WLB customers through targeted market research**, and second, to **increase reach among WLB customers through a targeted and multi-pronged sales and marketing campaign.**

Strategy 1:

Identifying women customers' needs, challenges and barriers through market research

Using purposive sampling, enumerators engaged over 300 existing and potential Husk customers in telephonic surveys in September - October 2022. The survey reached 132 existing and 80 potential Husk minigrid customers - of which 25% were women and 75% were men. The objectives of this exercise were to understand (potential) customers' needs, preferences, challenges and barriers in accessing Husk's mini-grid connections. In particular, survey analysis focused on identifying gendered differences.



The results were used to inform the subsequent sales and marketing campaign, which was implemented as Strategy 2 (see below).

The main findings of this research pointed the Husk team in a number of practical directions to reach WLBs. Specifically:

- **Average monthly energy expenditure among Husk customers is in line with the national average**, at approximately INR 418 per month (approximately USD 5).
- **Most women customers say their main reason for connecting to the minigrid is to expand the opening hours of their business**, which in turn would help grow their income and customer base. This is in part due to the benefits of increased safety and accessibility of their businesses after dark.
- **Potential Husk customers explained why they were not yet using Husk offerings**, which was mostly due to a lack of awareness. Potential customers explained that they were not aware of Husk's offering and the benefits of using it. Practical barriers like affordability or family approval were not a big factor.
- **Word-of-mouth** is by far the most common method for Husk customers to be attracted to the company's offering.
- Moreover, **women customers are more likely than their male counterparts to have other WLBs in their immediate networks**, which could be reached through word-of-mouth.
- **Across the board, customers are (very) satisfied with Husk's offering**, and in particular with engagements with Husk agents, as well as the customer service.

Based on these results, it was determined Strategy 2 would focus on increasing **WLBs' demand for energy by increasing their customer base** (and thus need for power) through a combination of:

- **Marketing, branding and visibility support, to drive more traffic to the WLBs; and**
- **Providing training on customer service and book-keeping, to support business growth.**

Strategy 2: Increasing women customers through a customer outreach campaign



Phase 1: Pilot referral scheme

In November 2022, Husk and Smart Power India (SPI) had launched the “Pragati Ki Aur” (“Towards Growth”¹⁰) referral campaign to attract more WLB customers, and increase revenue and footfall for these WLBs. This pilot was funded by the Rockefeller Foundation and GIZ.

500 WLBs were recruited as Husk customers, and coupons to an average value of INR 2000 (USD 25) (representing approximately 5 months worth of electricity usage) were distributed across them. These vouchers provided WLBs’ customers with discounts on products and services from identified businesses (e.g. cosmetics, food, etc.), thus directing more customers to these businesses - and the WLBs themselves received free electricity to the face value of each voucher that was ultimately redeemed by a customer.

Participating shops also received **Husk-branded marketing materials**¹¹. For example, personalised sign boards with women business owners’ photographs positioned them as brand ambassadors - and branded umbrella shades in street shops contributed to better visibility and footfall. The campaign was a success: 80% of the new WLB customers were retained at the end of the pilot period.

Based on the success of the initial pilot and the additional insights from the customer surveys conducted under the Value for Women technical assistance, Husk decided to implement a new and improved Phase 2 of Pragati Ki Aur.

Phase 2: Referrals & training scheme

For this second phase, between January and March 2023, the Husk team **recruited 150 WLBs as new customers**¹¹. These WLBs were recruited through direct outreach by the Husk agents, who have strong connections and local knowledge with the communities within which they operate.

These WLBs received vouchers of an average value of USD 15 (approximately INR 1209) (representing just under 3 months’ worth of electricity usage). Similar to the first phase, **participating WLBs could provide these discount vouchers to their customers - and for each redeemed voucher, the participating WLBs received a corresponding amount of discount** to their own Husk electricity.

The key differences in phase 2 were designed to improve the sustainability of the pilot, and increase the chances that the new WLB customers could continue to use (and pay for) power. Specifically, this included:

- **Detailed selection criteria.** This included businesses’ length of operations, number of employees, ability to take digital payments, and the amount of business experience of the owner.
- **Training to the participating WLBs.** This covered the use of Husk’s products and services, the benefits thereof, as well as financial record keeping, sales strategies, and customer experience. This aimed to increase efficiency and performance of their businesses overall, which would increase their likelihood of retention as Husk customers.

¹⁰Husk (2022). “Husk Power Systems and Smart Power India launch the “Pragati ki Aur” campaign to boost income of solar-powered, women-led MSMEs in rural India”.

¹¹ Across five districts in Bihar province, a key area of expansion for Husk: Champaran, Muzaffarpur, Vaisali, Siwan, and Chapraand.

Results: Attracting and retaining women customers

The results from Pragati Ki Aur Phase 2 were positive, and showed a significant improvement over those achieved in Phase 1¹².

In total, both phases of Pragati Ki Aur succeeded in **increasing Husk's WLB customer base from 2% to 8%**¹³ over the course of 1 year.

With the addition of dedicated training and marketing support, **Phase 2 retention of WLB customers was increased from 80% to 94%**. This demonstrates the benefits to long-term sustainability of offering such additional business support¹⁴.

Husk and Value for Women conducted further analysis of the voucher scheme's impact on the WLBs, through a survey of 20% of the WLBs participating in the scheme in rural and semi-rural areas.

- 96% of WLBs surveyed reported an **increase in the number of customers and the businesses' sales and profitability since starting the voucher scheme**, with the majority reporting a significant increase in both variables.
- **All the WLBs who participated in the branding activities reported increased visibility of their businesses.**
- **All the WLBs surveyed were happy with Husk's offering** and would continue to use the products: Overall the Net Promoter Score among respondents is high at 91¹⁵. Respondents indicated that this is because the electricity allows them to **increase profitability and build consistency of business**, while the voucher and branding initiatives **reduce the cost of business and attract more customers**. Together these factors increase profitability.

- **The training** turned out to be a **critical tool in supporting WLBs to understand and adopt the voucher programme**. The WLBs reported value in terms of context, clarity and informativeness as well as helping them in talking and interacting with customers easily.

In sum, this voucher scheme combined women-centric referrals; discount vouchers to raise awareness of Husk's products and services among hitherto unreached customers, thus ensuring their experience with the benefits of being connected to the mini-grid; and dedicated marketing and training support. Through combining these key success factors, Husk was able to **increase the representation of WLBs in their customer base**, and through **increased performance of these WLBs, sustainably increase their energy use and demand**. The Pragati Ki Aur pilots have proven the voucher and training scheme is an effective way to reach more WLB customers, **providing justification for Husk to continue iterating on this in future marketing strategies directed at WLBs**.



¹² Results were measured through internal Husk customer data and a follow-up survey among 20% of participating WLBs, at 2-3 months after implementation of Phase 2, from 19 April to 3 May 2023.

¹³ This is a cumulative total covering both Phases 1 and 2.

¹⁴ Please note that this number might decrease over time, as this endline data was recorded a relatively short period after implementation of the campaign.

¹⁵ A Net Promoter Score is a measure of satisfaction. Respondents indicate their likelihood of recommending a place of work, product, or service to their friends and family on a scale of 1-10. Respondents that indicate 1-6 are considered detractors, 7-8 neutrals, and 9-10 promoters. The NPS is calculated by subtracting the % of detractors from the % of promoters, and as such an NPS can range from -100 to 100. Any NPS above 0 is considered good, and any NPS above 50 is considered excellent

Key success factors

Market research was key in making the WLB-focused strategy more effective. Among others, the research pointed to the importance of linking energy access to business expansion as a key selling point and to sustain demand. The research also pointed to the effectiveness of using women's informal networks to reach more women, and a focus on raising awareness on benefits of energy access..

The integration of sales and marketing with business support was key for Husk's customer retention.

Participating WLBs valued the programme because it helped them attract and retain more customers. The growth of these businesses contributed to increased energy demand, and thus to the increased customer retention that Husk saw between Phases 1 and 2.

The addition of training was a key success factor. It was a crucial element in ensuring WLBs understood and adopted the voucher programme - thus raising awareness of Husk's products and the benefits of using them. In addition, participating WLBs reported value in terms of business performance, and improving their customer engagements.

Recommendations for enterprises interested in expanding their reach among women customers

It is important to treat women's customer segments like one would treat any other priority market, and invest in understanding and reaching it. It is critical to invest in (potentially light-touch) market research to uncover and validate insights about the market. Furthermore, there is clear value in designing and implementing women-targeted sales and marketing campaign. Here an up-front investment in lowering the barriers to entry can pay off through expanded reach, sustaining increased demand, and retention of new customers.

When considering strategies to reach, attract and retain women-led businesses, take a holistic view of their business needs beyond simply providing your products. Remember that their business success is your customer success - and tailor your approach accordingly. In linking multiple types of support (in this instance, training and dedicated marketing), you can not only make your offering more attractive, but you also overcome key hurdles such as a lack of awareness and knowledge of your products. Furthermore, such strategies improve business performance of your key customer segment, which can meaningfully cement longer-term customer demand and retention.





Conclusion

The two phases of the voucher pilot successfully increased Husk's women B2B customer base from 2% to 8% over the course of a year. Providing vouchers together with value-added services to WLB customers has already brought promising increases in customer loyalty; **Husk saw a 94% customer retention rate (up from 80%) within 2 months of the pilot implementation.**

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"Value for Women's technical support was pivotal in our Gender Inclusive and Diversity Programme's triumph. Their profound expertise, unwavering responsiveness, and innovative solutions were instrumental in crafting a highly successful campaign. Thanks to their dedication, we've empowered women customers and made a significant stride towards gender inclusivity. Their exceptional support has left an indelible mark on our mission and its impact."

- Management, Husk India

Husk's experience shows the tangible business benefits that can result from understanding one's women customers, using that understanding to design tailored strategies for women, and then piloting and evolving these strategies. Ultimately, it shows that it pays off to invest in understanding and serving this priority target market.

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