

**Flour Power**

How Future Group's Desi Atta Company is shaking up the flour market

Page 8

**Breakfast Foods**

A smorgasbord of new products and players riding the crest of healthy eating

Page 44

**Retailer**

Dry fruits specialist A&S Dry Fruits on business challenges and opportunities

Page 58

# PROGRESSIVE GROCER

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Page 34

## PUSHING THE RIGHT BUTTONS

How the  
Founders of  
AskMe Grocery  
have sculpted a  
dynamic online  
enterprise  
from the clay  
of grocery  
business



**Amit Nigam (Left) & Ankit Jain**  
Co-Founders, AskMe Grocery

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A flurry of policy decisions in recent days has made the industry reverberate – both in anticipation as well as trepidation. The decision allowing 100 per cent FDI in online retail of goods and services under the ‘marketplace model’ has been generally acclaimed, while rules prohibiting marketplaces from offering discounts, and capping total sales originating from a group company or one vendor at 25%, have led to much heartburn. The reactions have been along predictable lines though, depending on which side of the fence one is sitting on. However, the notification is in itself a cataclysmic move with the potential to shift the tectonic plates of the e-commerce industry.

Following the announcement, the industry is abuzz that global online megaliths such as China’s Alibaba and Japan’s Rakuten are giving final touches to their plans to make a splash in the Indian market. For these global biggies, India is definitely the destination of choice and a huge market to grow their business. Industry estimates show that e-commerce sales in India are expected to grow from \$14 billion in 2015 to \$55 billion in 2018.

Though a degree of turbulence and ‘creative destruction’ might be the logical deneoument in the wake of the new rules coming into force, I share an implicit trust in the genius of our young entrepreneurs. So despite the parsing and combing for nuances in the thicket of new rules, I hope the industry will not break its stride and continue to find innovative ways to unleash and harness its potential.



Amitabh Taneja  
 Editor-in-Chief

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**08 COLUMN:** Shaking up the atta market

### Markets & Movers



- 10 Dabon International:** From France, with love!
- 12 Lovely Bake Studio:** 'Sweet' Success Story
- 14 Veeba Food Services:** Tangy Sauces that Tingle Taste Buds
- 16 Marya Day Agro Foods:** Brand Promise: Customer Delight
- 18 Suresh Kumar & Co.:** Get More for Less
- 20 Rakesh Group:** Pepping up the spice industry!
- 22 Vezlay Foods:** How about some healthy snacking!
- 24 KSMD Impex (India):** Italian legacy to woo Indian palates!
- 26 Cremica Food Industries:** Spicing up Horeca & retail industry
- 28 Aussee Oats:** Taking a swing at the breakfast market



### Cover Story



**34 ASKME GROCERY:**  
"We are the largest online grocery player in the country today"



**30 PROFILE IN PROGRESS:**  
Supermarket of the Future



**42 NONFOODS:** Packed With Power

### Breakfast Foods



- 44 Pagariya Food Products:** "Hot cereals will drive growth of breakfast category"
- 48 MTR Foods:** "We are the leader in the Indian breakfast market with a 33% share"
- 50 Maiyas Beverages & Foods:** "Our founder is known as Father of Ready-to-Eat Food in India"
- 52 WestCoast Group:** "Our Frish fries, masala wedges and Kawan parathas are bestsellers"
- 54 Artisanal Gouri's:** "Our products cater to the luxury dietary-restricted segment"



**58 RETAILER / A & S DRY FRUITS:**  
Dry fruits specialist straddling both retail and wholesale

### IN EVERY ISSUE

- 60 WHAT'S NEXT**  
New products on the shelves
- 62 COLUMN: RETAIL GUIDE**

# Supermarket of the Future

Kroger is bringing grocery retailing into the 21st century

By **John Karolefski**



for this ecosystem 18 months ago. This enterprise IT architecture, called Retail Site Intelligence, is designed for stores of the 21st century. It relies on ZigBee wireless mesh networks to integrate long-life battery sensors, hand-held scanners, point-of-sale devices and video management software into a next-generation platform for retail applications such as loss prevention, store automation and analytics.

At the time of the launch, Chris Hjelm, Kroger's SVP and CIO, noted: "Retail Site Intelligence is, above all, about 'Customer First' innovation. We are leveraging technology to help customers have the best possible shopping experience in retail stores, whether by more easily finding the products they want or saving time at checkout. We expect Retail Site Intelligence to be the cornerstone of the technology infrastructure for Kroger stores in the future."

That would mean some changes will be on tap for the 2,640 supermarkets and multidepartment stores that Kroger operates in 34 states and the District of Columbia under two dozen local banners, among them Kroger, City Market, Dillons, Food 4 Less, Fred Meyer, Fry's, Harris Teeter, Jay C, King Soopers, QFC, Ralphs and Smith's (not including the merger with Milwaukee-based Roundy's, announced shortly before this issue went to press).

Kroger officials gave Progressive Grocer a tour of the Cold Spring store to see the new technology in place.

## Scan, bag, go

At the entrance of the store, customers are greeted by a Scan, Bag, Go kiosk loaded with hand-held scanners to use while shopping. After swiping a Kroger Plus loyalty card for identity purposes and to load previously selected coupons into the scanner, a shopper picks up a large plastic bag to fill with groceries. When shopping, she can scan and bag products taken off the shelf, including fruits and vegetables in the produce department. When finished, she scans a special bar code on a terminal at the front of the store that transfers her order to



**CUTTING EDGE**  
Tags blend neatly into the shelf edge and clearly display prices. A store clerk scans the bar code ID to to adjust product facings if planogram changes are needed

**T**he outside of the 55,000-square-foot Kroger store in Cold Spring, Ky., looks like a regular large supermarket. A quick glance inside finds the expected departments: produce, dairy, meat, center store and so on. Shoppers push their carts up and down aisles and around the perimeter in search of bargains and their favorite brands.

But this store, 10 miles southeast of Kroger's hometown of Cincinnati, serves as a laboratory to deploy and study the latest in-store technologies. The country's largest traditional grocer has digitized this supermarket and is setting the standard for how food retailing will be conducted in the 21st century.

Welcome to the Supermarket of the Future. "We are interested in creating a better shopping experience," Brett Bonner, the chain's VP of research and development, says emphatically.

To achieve that goal, Kroger has put together an ecosystem that blends shopper-facing hardware with sophisticated technology behind the scenes. The company introduced the foundational technology



**CHECKING IN**  
Customers swipe a Kroger Plus loyalty card to identify themselves and load previously selected coupons onto a hand-held scanner they use while shopping. Kroger's Keith Daly demonstrates how it's done

the checkout. The process saves time and reduces checkout lines.  
 "It's all about making the customer experience the best possible," explains Dion Perkins, Kroger's project lead for ZigBee networking. "The primary users of Scan, Bag, Go are the savvy budget customers. When they come to the store, they know how much [money] they have set aside for groceries," he says, explaining that the scanner keeps a running tally of the order, displaying the grocery bill while the customer shops. Checking out is a seamless experience."

Kroger officials were surprised that seniors have been the most frequent users of the system, first installed a few years ago and monitored ever since.

"A lot of seniors are going online for coupons," affirms Perkins. "There is information on Kroger.com for those customers who shop in a Scan, Bag, Go store. If they know something about

the system before they get there, there is a lot less anxiety. Once in the store, there is a TV monitor that walks through several of the steps. There are directions on the produce scales. If shoppers are not using the scanner properly, a pop-up screen asks if they need assistance," which is provided by a nearby store associate who's alerted by the technology.

And are they alerted at checkout if a shopper attempts to leave the store with some items in the bag that haven't been scanned?

The hand-held scanner monitors such possible incidents — whether intentional or by mistake — with a validation system that detects behavior that doesn't match up with past shopping trips. Spot checks are also performed randomly at checkout.

Scan, Bag, Go is installed in 15 Kroger supermarkets in the greater Cincinnati area. Last month, shoppers could begin using their



**Kroger's intent is to provide the best digital experience and best in-store experience for our shoppers**

—Brett Bonner  
Kroger



**TEAM PLAYERS**  
Kroger execs Dion Perkins, Brett Bonner, Doug Meiser and Titus Jones, and Cold Spring Store Manager Tom Armbruster (from left, in ties) pose with ZigBee Alliance Chairman John Osborne II (far right) and store associates

A photograph of two men standing in a grocery store aisle. The man on the left is wearing a dark grey button-down shirt and dark trousers. The man on the right is wearing a light blue button-down shirt, dark trousers, glasses, and a watch on his left wrist. They are both looking towards the camera. The background shows shelves stocked with various grocery items, including fresh produce and packaged goods.

**“We are the  
LARGEST  
ONLINE  
GROCERY  
PLAYER in  
the country  
today”**



**Amit Nigam (left) & Ankit Jain**  
Co-Founders, AskMe Grocery

AskMe Grocery might be a Johnny-come-lately in online grocery but the company has thrust ahead of its competitors like a turbocharged rocket. In barely a year of blasting off the blocks, it has ignited an impressive blaze on the grocery e-tailing firmament, establishing a presence in 38 cities so far with plans to streak across some 40 newer cities in the next six months. **“Our core strength is to give consumers a regional flavour, a bouquet of local brands and popular products for a particular locality. The local offering is bundled with the trust of quality and lowest pricing. These, along with efficiency, will give us the value proposition that will ensure we stay ahead of the competition,”** says Ankit Jain, Co-Founder, AskMe Grocery, while discussing about how his company is powering ahead in the marketplace by playing to its strengths: asset-light model, zero inventory, no warehousing and riding on the crest of technology to make use of smart analytics, demand forecast and consumer behaviour to juice more business

### **What led to AskMe Grocery and what is its business model?**

Grocery is one of the fastest growing segments in Indian Retail. The Indian food and grocery market is the world's sixth-largest today and is projected to grow at the rate of 104% to touch \$482 billion by 2020, as per India Brand Equity Foundation.

*The huge opportunity offered by the grocery segment led to the AskMe Group acquiring 'Best at Lowest' and rebranding it as AskMe Grocery. Based on a hyperlocal model, the brand provides an online platform for local kirana stores to sell groceries to the untapped households, in their vicinity. Over the past 6-8 months, the brand has scaled to 38 cities across the country and is aiming to be operational in 40 more cities in the next 3-6 months.*

### **How is the management structured?**

The management is structured in a way that both the founders complement each other. *While Amit Nigam is responsible for the end to end management of the seller relationship, I lead Brand Onboarding and operations for AskMe Grocery.*

### **What are the reasons for choosing the marketplace over the inventory model?**

I believe that venturing into the inventory-based model will imply compromising on scalability and speed. Further, in decentralised operations, it is very difficult to manage inventory efficiently, which leads to losses, pilferage and dump.

*An inventory based model in online grocery space is not doing well due to the high costs involved in stock keeping and warehousing whereas a marketplace model does not require us to maintain stock. We let the stocks rest with the brick and mortar retailers with whom we have tied up with for a particular locality. Once the customer places the order online, our runners visit the retailer with orders in bulk. The runner then takes these goods to the hub where they are screened using the three step quality check. Then they are processed for delivery once they pass the test. The runner then delivers the orders to their specific location.*

The hyperlocal model will work better in the online grocery business as it is asset light. It plugs the offline sellers to the online business model and helps them with an alternative avenue for business.

### **Tell us about AskMe Grocery's current range of operations and its progress.**

*AskMe Grocery is currently active in 38 cities across 18 states and we plan to scale it up to 40 new cities within the next three to six months. The cities include Vishakhapatnam, Delhi-NCR, Ahmedabad, Surat, Vadodara, Panchkula, Ranchi, Bengaluru, Mangalore, Kochi, Bhopal, Indore, Mumbai, Nagpur, Nasik, Pune, Navi Mumbai, Thane, Bhubaneswar, Chandigarh, Ludhiana, Mohali, Zirakpur, Udaipur, Jodhpur, Jaipur, Chennai, Coimbatore, Hyderabad, Secunderabad, Dehradun and Kolkata.*

Currently, we are looking to add to the kitty of tier-II cities. These include Agra, Lucknow, Kanpur and cities in the Northeast such as Guwahati.

### **What is your marketing positioning and the differentiators?**

*We are the largest online grocery player in the country today, with a presence in 38 cities. Some of our differentiators include:*

- Most competitive pricing
- Extensive reach
- Delivery in 4-6 hours

One of the key value additions by our brand is the three-point quality check before delivery of any order. We are committed to delivering a high quality customer experience to all our shoppers.

### **What is your core strategy for creating and building market advantage?**

I believe that the market and opportunities are so huge that a single business model or player cannot be the winner. *AskMe Grocery's core strength is to give consumers a regional flavour, a bouquet of local brands and popular products for a particular locality. The local offering is bundled*



# “We are the leader in the Indian breakfast market with a 33% share”

Perna Tiku, Category Manager – Breakfast Mixes, MTR Foods, speaks to Progressive Grocer about its varied offerings and the company’s leadership role in the Indian breakfast market

**Tell us about your company and its product range in the breakfast category.**

MTR Foods has a 90-year-old history of serving authentic Indian food. With a diverse portfolio including breakfast, lunch and dinner, snacks, beverages and desserts, MTR Foods is known as a brand that makes the homemaker the ‘hero’. Breakfast mixes is one of our key growth categories with a deep national presence. As leaders in the Indian breakfast segment, we offer the widest range of products and strongly believe in innovation as being one of the drivers of growth. We have come out with innovative products like rava idli and the multigrain breakfast range among others over the years. We rolled out our first communication for breakfast mixes five years ago, which played a significant role in uncapping the potential of the category for us. Since then, the category has grown five times and today we have 21 different breakfast mixes offerings.

**Which consumer segments are your products targeted at?**

Our core target group is the Indian homemaker, both working and stay-at-home, who use our mixes

to create a wide variety of wholesome breakfasts. Based on our internal estimates, the packaged branded breakfast food market is about INR 1,400 crore within which the Indian breakfast mixes add up to about INR 200 crore. MTR Foods is the leader in the Indian breakfast space market with a 33 per cent share, according to our internal estimates.

**What has been the growth rate of your product offerings and what is the projected growth rate?**

We continue to have a strong double digit growth (25-30%) over the last three years, and expect it to only get better! Advertising has been the biggest contributor to growth for us, supported by a 360 degree activation which includes digital and on ground. We also believe that innovation – both in the food as well as in packaging formats – plays a big part in getting new consumers to the category.

**Which are the key markets for your products? What is your strategy for taking your products to newer markets?**

We started from our home base of Karnataka and grew over the years to become the leading player



not just in south India but also in other parts of the country. In markets like Delhi, we have over 70 per cent market share.

One of our key strategies to increase our reach is to include popular breakfasts from other parts of India in our portfolio – though we started out with popular south Indian breakfasts like idli and dosa, we recently introduced much-loved variants from other parts of India like poha, which have gained quite a bit of traction in the market. Another important strategy to induct more consumers is to include newer packaging formats that reduce the time required to prepare and consume breakfasts. Breakfast in a cup range is our newest launch, which offers breakfast that can be ready in just three minutes and gives the consumer the option to consume breakfast on-the-go.

#### **With the emerging trend in favour of more health-positive products, what have been your initiatives on this front?**

Our products are made of grains like wheat, ragi, oats, etc, so they inherently carry the nutrition and wholesome goodness of grains. We introduced our multigrain range a few years ago, which is an amalgamation of various grains in formats that can be consumed easily like our ragi rava idli. We continue to innovate on new formats and ingredients to give our consumers unique yet familiar experiences.

#### **What is the contribution from Modern Trade and General Trade to your overall sales ?**

Last year, General Trade (GT) was the biggest contributor to breakfast mixes with almost 70 per cent coming in from this channel and a little more than 30 per cent coming in from Modern Trade (MT). While GT is a bigger contributor to business, we feel that MT is a great place to find experimentative consumers and engage with them.

#### **What is the market growth for breakfast mixes in particular? What is the projected growth rate for the future?**

Indian breakfast mixes category has been consistently growing at a healthy pace and MTR breakfast mixes is growing faster than the category (25-30%). However, we feel that we have only scratched the surface. There is huge potential for the category to grow further – more and more people are open to experimentation and have lesser time than ever before.

#### **What is your marketing strategy for promoting your breakfast mixes?**

Research shows that while homemakers generally spend less than an hour planning and making breakfast on a weekday due to paucity of time, it

extends up to 1-3 hours on a weekend with taste and variety taking center stage. We believe that MTR's wide range of breakfast mixes is a great fit for weekend consumption and a natural choice for families to come together and enjoy a delectable breakfast spread. We launched a new campaign last year with this thought, celebrating our iconic six-arm woman in a whole new avatar, bonding with her family over a weekend, while making breakfast.

#### **Which are the ingredients whose use in breakfast mixes is on the rise?**

Ingredients like ragi, wheat, oats, mix of grains (multigrain), etc., are increasingly being adopted by the consumer. Consumers, on the one hand, are recognising the goodness of traditional Indian wonder ingredients like ragi as well as catching on to upcoming trends like quinoa and oats.

#### **What is the scope for greater value-addition in your product range?**

Our endeavour is to enable the consumers to make their favourite Indian breakfast in easy-to-make formats so that they can enjoy a great variety of home-cooked breakfast. We innovate both in terms of ingredients – for example oats upma, multigrain dosa, vermicelli, upma, etc. – as well as formats like Breakfast in a Cup.

#### **How do you look at the market potential for whole host of protein, energy, fiber and other nutrition bars in India?**

Our newest innovation – Breakfast in a Cup – is an on-the-go product that helps the time-pressed consumer to carry their favourite wholesome Indian breakfast wherever they go. There is no cooking needed and just by adding hot water consumers can enjoy hot Indian breakfast in popular variants such as poha and upma just about anywhere! This product has shown great traction in the market since its launch and we will continue to innovate on the on-the-go and nutritious concepts. **PG**



**Our core target group is the Indian homemaker, both working and stay-at-home, who use our mixes to create a wide variety of wholesome and delicious breakfasts**

—Prerna Tiku  
Category Manager –  
Breakfast Mixes,  
MTR Foods



# what's next

## ▼ Extra wavy and crispier corn flakes

Pagariya Food Products Pvt Ltd. has introduced Kwaliti corn flakes as a nutritious and delicious family breakfast. The flakes have been made more curvy and wavy, they are crispier than ever, and innately appealing. The mild baking makes the corn flakes crispier and gives all the nutritional advantages of a cooked food. The texture and crispiness gives the desire to relish by adding milk to it. The crunchiness and mouth feel sustain so long till you complete the last bite. Kwaliti corn flakes are available in an attractive pack, and come in 375 gm box at Rs. 99 and 100 gm box at Rs. 35. A 500 gm pouch is also available at Rs. 105. Kwaliti's other range of cereals include Choco flakes, Fruitooos, Ragi Flakes, Oats, Muesli's, Corn Flakes Strawberry, Honey and Banana, Wheat flakes with many new products in the pipeline.



## ► Eggless cookies

Lovely Bake Studio, a premier European inspired bakery, has launched a new offering – a range of 100 per cent eggless delicacies. The company says it is a first-of-its-kind concept in North India. The eggless cookies come packed in boxes of 75 gm, 200 gm and 400 gm. The product is distributed through the company's network of more than 500 premium retailers and more than 10 distributors in North India currently.



## ► Natural flavoured sweetcorns

Supa Star Foods, which sells sweet corn products under the brand Supacorn, has recently launched two new variants of sweet corn kernels with natural flavours – Achari and Italian Herb. The packaging technology, called Oxyfresh, allows the products to have nine months of shelf life at ambient temperature, while offering several benefits to the consumer. The products are ready to eat without the need to boil; they contain no preservatives, not even salt or sugar; there's no need wash and no need to drain as there is no brine; enjoys long shelf life at ambient temperature so there is no need to freeze – just keep it at cool and dry place until pack is opened.

Some of the products' popular applications are in salads, soups, corn tikki, corn samosa, pizza, cakes and various veg and non-veg dishes. Supacorn products are now available in more than 20 cities of India and can be bought from various supermarkets like More, Spar, Metro, Heritage, Smart Retail, Hypercity, Star Bazar, Needs, Le Marche, Modern Bazaar and many more.



## ▲ New range of jams

With its sweet and tangy taste, the new Kissan Blast range of jams promises a one of its kind experience. The range includes exciting fruity flavours: Berry Blast, Strawberry Blast and Orange Blast.

Kissan Berry Blast is a combination of juicy black grapes and ripe, succulent strawberries – a perfect blend between sweet and tangy. The burst of blueberry flavour is a quirky taste, which you can enjoy along with muffins and pancakes. Kissan Strawberry Blast is made from lush, red strawberries, and you can enjoy it with ice-cream, milkshake and smoothies. Kissan Orange Blast tastes a little sweet and a little tangy. This jam gives a burst of the real fruit flavour and tastes heavenly with bread, chapati or parathas.

Says Abhiroop Chuckarbutty, GM, Foods, HUL, "We, at Kissan, continue to innovate and create new products and flavours to make the lives of mothers easy in keeping pace with the changing palate of today's children. Kissan Blast range of jams, is a healthy, wholesome and fruitful outcome of this continuous innovation. A mouth-watering combination of tangy and sweet taste, Kissan Blast is sure to bowl over the kids of today."

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**BREAKFAST IN A CUP**



3 VARIANTS



JUST ADD  
HOT WATER



3  
MINUTES



SPOON  
INSIDE



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Serves one. For more details, refer to the pack. Packs available in select markets only.

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