

From AI to reliability: Ujjivan SFB CMO Lakshman Velayutham on marketing banking with trust

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*In an exclusive Q&A with MediaBrief, **Lakshman Velayutham**, Chief Marketing Officer, Ujjivan Small Finance Bank, speaks about how the bank is positioning reliability as a customer proposition, balancing AI-led personalisation with responsible marketing, and integrating AI into its creative pipeline. Read on.*

Before we get into the specifics, could you tell us a little about Ujjivan Small Finance Bank from your perspective, the customers you are most focused on reaching, and where you see the bank's current position in the market?

Ujjivan Small Finance Bank is one of India's leading Small Finance Banks, committed to advancing financial inclusion by serving the needs of aspirational

Indians. Established as a Small Finance Bank in 2017, Ujjivan has evolved from its microfinance roots into a full-service bank offering a comprehensive suite of products across savings, deposits, loans, payments, and digital banking.

The Bank also has specialized products like the Maxima account and the Ivory programme that caters to the affluent banking segment. A key strategic focus for the Bank has been portfolio diversification, supported by a growing retail deposit franchise and an expanding secured lending business.

As of March 2026, secured loans account for 49.4% of the Gross Loan Book, led by Affordable Housing Loans, Micro Mortgages, MSME lending, Vehicle Finance, Gold Loans, and Agri Banking.

Today, Ujjivan Small Finance Bank serves more than 1 crore customers through a network of more than 776 branches across 26 States and Union Territories. The Bank has

built a strong presence across urban, semi-urban, and rural markets, with a continued



focus on advancing financial inclusion and expanding access to formal banking services for individuals and businesses.

‘Business Experience’ (BX) and backend reliability. From a marketing perspective, how do you tangibly position reliability and robust backend systems as an exciting customer value proposition? How do you market structural stability to a retail audience that is conditioned to chase discount coupons and sleek app interfaces?

Customers rarely wake up thinking about core banking systems or backend architecture. But what they do care about, is whether their money moves when it needs to move, whether the app works when they need it, and whether someone is available when something goes wrong.

Reliability becomes meaningful only when we can translate it into outcomes for customers. A seamless UPI transaction, a successful fund transfer, quick grievance resolution, or uninterrupted access to services are all manifestations of how we see backend strength.

We live in an era where digital experiences are increasingly similar. Thus, reliability is becoming a powerful differentiator because it is one of the few things, customers remember when it fails.

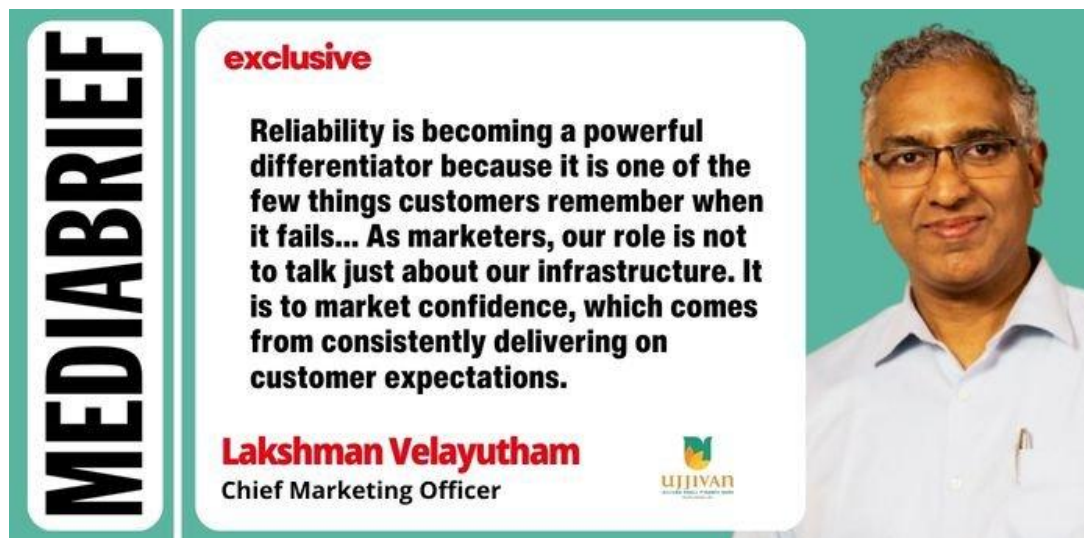
As marketers, our role is not to talk just about our infrastructure. It is to market confidence, which comes from consistently delivering on customer expectations.

How do you draw the line between useful AI-led nudges and intrusive marketing? How do you ensure WhatsApp and SMS communications feel like financial guidance, not a sales push?

Whenever we design a communication, we ask ourselves, ‘Is it creating value for the customer, or only for us?’

AI gives us the ability to personalise communication at scale, but personalisation without responsibility can become intrusive. Recent discussions around AI governance are increasingly reinforcing the need for human oversight and accountability in customerfacing AI systems.

For example, there is a difference between helping a customer understand a product for a genuine financial need and repeatedly pushing products simply because the algorithm predicts a high conversion probability.



While the latter can identify opportunities, it is our human judgement that will determine whether pursuing those are appropriate to the customer. In banking, we believe that every communication should leave the customer feeling informed and empowered, not pressured.

The future of AI-driven marketing, will belong to brands that use artificial intelligence and human judgment, to build trust and not just conversions.

Beyond interest rates, what are you doing to build long-term customer loyalty and make Ujjivan the primary salary or transaction account, rather than just a secondary savings account?

Our focus is on becoming a meaningful part of a customer's complete financial journey rather than being viewed as a standalone product provider. This includes simplifying banking experiences, strengthening service accessibility, investing in vernacular communication, and ensuring that customers can interact with us through channels that are familiar and comfortable for them.

We also believe loyalty is created when customers feel understood. Whether it is a small entrepreneur, a salaried professional, or a first-time borrower, their expectations go beyond interest rates. Everyone looks for reliability, convenience, transparency, and respect. And that is how we have been and will continue to engage with our customers and build that loyalty.

With regulatory and compliance requirements becoming more stringent, how do you balance the need to move quickly on contextual campaigns



with the multiple checks required before launch, without slowing down marketing agility?

At a fundamental level, I don't see compliance and marketing agility as opposing forces. From where I stand, when it comes to banking, trust is the product before the product. If a campaign reaches the market quickly but compromises on clarity or customer confidence, it ultimately impacts our growth.

Over the years, we have moved from viewing compliance as a 'final checkpoint' to involving it seamlessly through our planning process. The more aligned the teams are at the ideation and planning stage, the less friction there is during execution.



Technology and AI are helping here as well. They help teams identify potential gaps, inconsistencies, early in the process, allowing us to move faster without compromising on governance. The objective is not to remove human oversight but to make approvals more predictable and efficient.

For us, agility is not about speed alone, it is about being able to move quickly while maintaining the trust customers place in us.

In a regulated BFSI environment, how do you balance AI experimentation with brand safety and compliance? Do you have a framework for testing creative ideas while keeping the risks low?

I come from the point of view that experimentation is important because customer behaviour and technology are evolving rapidly. But that experimentation cannot come at the cost of trust.

Our philosophy is to experiment in areas where the risk to the customer is low, while maintaining much higher controls wherever financial decisions, disclosures, or customer data are involved. We encourage teams to explore AI-driven creativity, content development, and experience design. But every output passes through human review, particularly where brand reputation, regulatory requirements, or customer understanding could be affected.



The criteria for us is not, 'Can AI do this?' – It is, 'Should AI do this?'. The answer to that

question often determines where experimentation ends and governance, oversight begins.



How are you integrating AI into your creative pipeline, and what human oversight do you have in place to ensure AI-generated content stays authentic to the Ujjivan brand?

We view AI as a creative accelerator rather than a creative replacement. Today, AI supports various stages of the creative process – from idea exploration and concept development, to testing multiple visual directions more efficiently. We have, in fact, adapted to this structure where almost 1/3rd of our content has some part of AI involvement across the development process.

However, authenticity remains a human responsibility. Every output is reviewed through the lens of brand consistency, cultural appropriateness, regulatory sensitivity, and customer relevance.

Particularly in banking, customers place significant value on credibility. Therefore, human review remains central to the process. AI is a great help to explore options, but people ultimately determine what best represents the brand and the customer.

AI-led communication remains culturally relevant, accessible and empathetic, rather than being designed primarily for digital-first audiences?

A large part of Ujjivan's customer base comes from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Therefore, every piece of communication must pass a simple test: will this feel familiar and understandable to the customer we are speaking to?

We continue to ensure we rely on vernacular communication across 11 languages, local market understanding, and on-ground feedback. AI can help us create and adapt content faster, but it is our local/on-ground teams help us understand whether the communication genuinely resonates there, even in the specific details – language, cultural cues, local behaviours, and lived realities.

***Mann Ki Rath* – Brainwave is one example of Ujjivan’s marketing approach, especially across Bharat. What was the thinking behind the campaign, how did you bring it to life, and what does it say about the way you want Ujjivan to market itself?**



Mann Ki Rath was designed as a technology-led experiential campaign to create deeper emotional engagement with customers at the branch level. The activity started across our Odisha Bhubaneswar branches including Samantarapur & Saheed Nagar, Chandrasekharpur, Cuttack, Puri and Buxi Bazar branches.

At the branch level, customers were invited and briefed about the concept before experiencing the activation through EEG neuro-sensing headbands. Participants wore the headband and, through focus and calmness, were able to virtually pull the Rath using brainwave technology. This created a unique blend of spirituality, mindfulness, and innovation, making the experience highly interactive and memorable. universities to increase public participation and brand visibility. Across locations, we engaged around 50–80 customers per branch daily and generated approximately ₹8 Cr business opportunity during the activation period.

The campaign demonstrated how innovative experiential marketing, rooted in cultural relevance and powered by technology, can drive strong customer connection, higher engagement, and meaningful business impact while strengthening Ujjivan SFB’s image as a progressive and customer-centric brand.

Looking ahead, what is the biggest opportunity you see for Ujjivan, and what will be your single biggest priority as CMO in shaping that future?

The future of banking will not be defined by technology alone. It will be defined by how effectively institutions combine technology with trust.

For Ujjivan, the opportunity ahead is to continue evolving as a digitally capable, customer-centric bank while remaining deeply rooted in the communities we serve. As customer expectations grow, our responsibility is to make banking simpler, more accessible, and more relevant across every interaction.

Personally, my biggest priority is building credibility at scale. As AI interventions evolve to generate content, personalise communication, and automate experiences, the real differentiator will be whether customers believe that the institution genuinely



understands them. That is where I believe brands will win.

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