

# ‘Say hello to affordable luxury!’

This exhortation for the masses, who consume spirits products, comes from **Lisa Srao, Chairman and MD, I Brands**. Lisa’s young company is just three years into the Indian market but has grown rapidly by making ‘luxury affordable’ for the masses through its competitively-priced high-quality products. She takes stock of I Brands performance so far and talks about their future plans while interacting with **Shalini Kumar**.



**P**roviding great quality products that would give great value for money — That was the prime objective of Lisa Srao, Chairman and MD, I Brands, when she set up her company in 2008. “We set up the company to make products matching international standards in quality. I believe in affordable luxury, and I want to offer that to the Indian market,” thus explains Lisa the prime goal of I Brands.

Lisa is aware that “Staying afloat in the liquor industry is very tough, and most new entrants are known to have shut shop within six months of business operation due to the financially intensive character of the industry.”

I Brands too had very little financial support, but it survived. Lisa explains the survival mantra: “We

have really fantastic products which have been performing fabulously well in the market. It is only due to their outstanding performance that we have been able to survive in a complex and competitive market like liquor. No one else is selling products of such international quality in such price sensitive segments. We have reduced our own profit margin to ensure the customers get the best value for money. This philosophy has sustained us in such a competitive market.”

According to Lisa, having no big marketing budgets, they heavily relied on quality and pricing to sell their products. “Customers did like our blends for their quality and affordable pricing, and they came back for more. This gave distributors the confidence to place repeat orders with us,” tells Lisa.



### Successful debut by Three Royals

Giving the example of their Three Royals whisky, Lisa tells “all initial stocks of this product were sold out in the first market that we entered.” She describes Three Royals as “a luxury premium breath-taking blend of fabulous quality” and reveals “the response to Three Royals in Arunachal and Assam far exceeded our expectations, and has led to talks of building a bottling plant in the North East.”

Among other products of I Brands, “the re-launched Granton whisky also flew off the shelves.” Then there is Rum 99 which Lisa calls “a very edgy and trendy product

and a strong alternative to Old Monk. The blend is good, and the product is very international in its look and feel – a huge hit with youngsters. It outsells all our brands in terms of volume.”

I Brands has recently launched a French brandy, Granton brandy, in Pondicherry, which according to Lisa, “seems to be doing exceptionally well. The local community has really taken to it.”

### Flagship Granton: Luxury made affordable

Granton whisky, launched in 2010, is the flagship product of I Brands. Positioned in the premium mass-market segment, it was re-launched recently. Granton whisky, according to Lisa, “has all the factors that contribute to a perfect product — excellent look and feel of international standard, a blend that appeals to the market, and an affordable price tag.”

Today, Lisa is “extremely proud of our stunning new Granton. Since its re-launch, it has literally been flying off the shelves. It far exceeds the competition in its segment, and has also won an industry award.”

According to Lisa, the Granton USP is “its incredibly luxurious look and feel, its top-of-the-line fine blend, and its price varying between Rs 240 and Rs 495 per bottle. One may be really perplexed as to how an earth it is humanly possible to produce such a fine quality product at such an affordable pricing. Well, say hello to affordable luxury!”

Why did I Brands go for the re-launch of Granton whisky? Lisa replies, “Unlike the industry norm of allowing a long gestation period for newly launched products, we pulled out Granton whisky within three years of its launch. Both the team and I felt that we had a really good product. It was doing well in the market, but it had much more potential. So we pulled it out and made it even better to give the end consumer the best possible experience of fine whisky.”

During the Granton rebranding process, its blend was improved using the data collected over the three years the product was in the market. “Essentially the new Granton is a richly layered whisky blended from the finest Scotch, malts and select Indian grain spirits. It has hints of locally popular flavour,” informs Lisa. Granton packaging was also given “a dramatic face-lift, from mono-carton packaging to canister packaging. The Granton whisky canister features a stunning lion design that is also embossed on the bottle.”

Granton has been re-launched with “a very edgy ad campaign that features the cool and upcoming actor Namit

Khanna, with a tagline *Sheron Wala Dum.*” According to Lisa, through Khanna, they want to connect with “the strong, young ambitious male/female. The kind of person that wants to make a name for himself, who is cool, who is successful, and wants the best in life.”



## Packaging tweak for luxury look

Lisa was “clear from the very beginning that I wanted our consumers to experience luxury at every point of interaction with our products.” So product packaging is also a priority for her, as she tells, “Being a new entrant and a relatively small company, packaging is key for us. Our packaging has been developed by a team of international and Indian consultants. Being absolutely outstanding in its design aesthetic, packaging has helped move our products off the shelves.”

In case of Three Royals, it’s the embossed bottle and canister packaging that makes it unique in its category. All the three sizes (750ml, 375ml and 180ml) of Three Royals

come with canister packaging, which, according to Lisa, “gives the product a very premium look and feel. If one looks at competitive products in the similar segment, one will find that canister packaging, especially in smaller sizes, is not the norm as it is expensive.”

An important aspect of the I Brands marketing, that had a bearing on packaging, was their focus on retail rather than wholesale. “We do not believe in dumping. This approach required our products to be excellent in quality, packaging and presentation to succeed in the market,” she explains.

## Slow, steady approach to marketing

I Brands, realizing its limitations as a small company, did not start with metro cities. “We went down the semi-urban route, consolidating each state slowly and steadily, before launching the next. These markets meant less competition and better visibility. Thanks to our competitive price tag and products of international quality, profitability in these markets has been good. This slow and steady approach has allowed us to prosper,” tells Lisa.

In just three short years, the company has registered its presence across eight states. It is growing at a massive speed in Punjab, Chandigarh, Uttarakhand, Haryana, Goa, Pondicherry, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. In fact, Three Royals whisky, tells Lisa, “has especially outperformed itself in Arunachal and Assam.”

According to Lisa, this year the company will double its turnover in comparison to the previous year’s. She is elated at this “massive accomplishment, given the company’s humble beginnings. It’s also an indication that our brands are extremely well received in the market.”

Plans are afoot to enter Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Mizoram, Himachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Andaman & Nicobar Islands shortly. I Brands also has global aspirations, as Lisa tells, “We are also looking at export orders and are in discussions for markets in Europe and Africa.”

## New products and a bottling plant

Over the course of a year, I Brands is planning to launch a rare French brandy, vodka, beer and an imported wine collection to diversify its portfolio. Another important item on its launch menu is a new whisky in an even more price sensitive segment, that is, Rs 200–250. Lisa is excited about the launch, as she says, “Strategically, it is the right segment for us to enter to complement our other two whisky brands. We feel this price bracket has increased its market share by 15–20% in the main states we are in.”

Double Dutch beer, which was created by Lisa’s father a decade ago and has become almost a cult among beer connoisseurs, may also be launched in the Indian market.

In view of its expanding business, I Brands also wants to have its own bottling units. Thanks to Three Royals’ success in the North East, the company is planning to acquire a bottling unit there. It is also exploring avenues to have its own bottling units in Punjab and Himachal. “For our growing volumes, quality assurance, production savings, and asset building, we must have our own bottling units. This will help us strengthen our place in the Indian market,” feels Lisa. ☺

