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Lava Mobilephones: Strategies in a Competitive Environment

On the morning of Monday, 10th July 2017, Mr. Gaurav Nigam, the product head of LAVA mobiles, is going through a detailed report which he ordered to investigate the reasons for LAVA's poor performance in the year 2016-17. Gaurav received a sales performance report for LAVA in April (see Exhibit 1). The company's revenue growth and market share declined in FY16-17, and its senior management expects both to increase. Gaurav has assured management that the scenario will improve considerably in the next year, but as early as Q1 2017 all the market indicators seem to be stacked against LAVA. The revenue growth and the sales forecast for rest of FY17-18 do not look very encouraging, either. This performance came as a shock to the company's management.

In a cursory look at the report, Gaurav has found several worrying facts about the future of the LAVA brand. The competitive landscape of the mobile phone industry has changed drastically over the last year. All Indian mobile phone vendors, including LAVA, are struggling to survive, let alone grow, in the face of aggressive Chinese competitors with deep pockets.

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The report indicates that customers perceive the quality of LAVA mobiles to be less consistent than that of its competitors. The report also casts doubt on the company's market segmentation strategy. Gaurav wonders if they are targeting the right customers with appropriate products. He remembers that the top management has asked him to present a revised marketing strategy for rest of FY17-18 within a fortnight. Now, he has a week's time to prepare to allay the fears of his top management.

1. Development of the Telecom Industry in India

The decade 2001-2011 witnessed an explosion of telecom operators in India. During that time, the total number of telephone subscribers grew at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 35%. By contrast, CAGR of telephone subscribers in the 1980s and 1990s was 9% and 22%, respectively (NCAER 2012). International comparisons show that India has one of the lowest mobile tariffs in the world. The wireless data cost is coming down rapidly. As of Q1 2017, the annualized cost of 1 GB data per month had come down to 1.3% of the country's annual average gross domestic product (GDP) per capita. The threshold for widespread affordability is 2% GDP per capita (see Exhibit 2). Between 2007 and 2010, prepaid and blended rates showed a decline of 25.3% and 21.5%, respectively. Under a blended rate, multiple services are provided as one package; for example, voice calls and data would be provided as a bundle instead of having different tariffs for each. By contrast, postpaid tariffs showed a decline of only 8.23% (NCAER 2012).

The majority of phone subscriptions in India are of the prepaid type. The dominance of prepaid emerged in South Asia first and is termed the budget telecom network model. The Indian telecom sector underwent a major transformation through significant policy reforms at the advent of the 21st century. These reforms encouraged opening up of the telecom sector to competition. Many new entrants to the market, such as Uninor, Aircel, and Vodafone, offered lucrative plans to consumers. The heightened competition led consumers to maintain multiple SIMs. One SIM would be used as a primary SIM to receive calls, while the other/s would be used to make calls based on the best available offer. Realising this consumer behavior, mobile manufacturers started offering dual SIM technology in mobile phones. Nokia was the most dominant player in the

2000s, but its portfolio consisted mainly of single SIM phones in feature phone and smartphone segments.

2. LAVA Mobiles: Sensing the Opportunity, “Creating Possibilities”

There was a definite opportunity for dual SIM phones in the market. Sensing this opportunity, four Indian entrepreneurs, Shri Hari Om Rai, Sunil Bhalla, Shailendra Nath Rai, and Vishal Sehgal started a company to cater to the growing mobile handset market.

Initially, the company entered the trading business. It imported mobiles from China and sold them in the Indian market. After a while, however, the founders realized that to create value, they needed to build a brand. This led to the establishment of LAVA International in 2009.

LAVA and its channel partners follow a principle –“Create Possibilities.” LAVA was set up with the aim of providing customers with high-quality mobiles at affordable prices; to that end, it has set up a research and development (R&D) center and a quality center in China. The company has become known for its ethical policies among channel partners and its excellent quality and customer service experience among customers. LAVA China and LAVA India act as two separate entities of LAVA International Ltd. LAVA India operates in India, while LAVA China caters to the rest of the world.

The LAVA family has now grown to more than 15,000 people. It is headquartered in Noida, India, and has operations in Thailand, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Indonesia, Mexico, the Middle East, Russia, and Egypt. It sells a variety of items, including mobile phones, tablets, and laptops, but the major part of its revenue comes from its mobile phone business. It has two manufacturing plants in Noida, each with a production capacity of 1.5 million units. The first plant was set up in April 2015 and the second plant in August 2016. LAVA is planning to set up a factory in Tirupati, Andhra Pradesh, in line with the government’s “Make in India” initiative.¹

Hari Om Rai, one of the founder of LAVA, said the following in a press meet in 2015: We currently have about 7,000 people, and we are on track to double this number by March next

¹ Information accessed with the consent of LAVA International.

year. These people will be hired across various roles in manufacturing, R&D, sales, and marketing.

LAVA's revenue has increased exponentially over the years. Its market share has grown to a considerable 9% of the Indian market. It started its operations with a portfolio of six feature phones, which it increased to more than 50 handsets by 2015-16, including both feature phones and smartphones. LAVA has emerged as a leading multi-national corporation (MNC) in India with a base of 1,200 distributors and 1.5 lakh retailers.

In an interview with *Business Standard* in April 2017, Gaurav told a correspondent that LAVA is building an army of at least 700 personnel to monitor the market by directly touching some 100,000 outlets that sell LAVA phones. This sales force is to visit every retail outlet at least twice a month, checking stock levels and brand visibility.

3. Mobile Industry in India: The Current Scenario

The global smartphone industry amassed revenue of \$431 billion in 2016 (statistica.com 2017). Traditionally, most of this revenue used to come from developed markets such as North America and Europe. However, due to market saturation, smartphone manufacturers are now looking towards developing countries for growth. Among developing countries, India's market potential is high (see Exhibit 3).

India has one of the faster growing mobile phone markets in the world. Regarding revenue, the Indian mobile handset market recorded a 22% rise in revenue at ₹1.36 lakh crore in 2016 (calendar year), against around ₹1.12 lakh crore in 2015 (CMR, 2017).. The mobile phone industry grew rapidly between the years 2010 and 2016. As of March 2016, India had taken the second position after China in the list of the biggest global markets, overtaking the USA (Novonous, 2016).. That same year, India had 355 million mobile users with 28% market penetration. The growth trends are on the upward swing and show huge potential (see Exhibit 4). Many technologies are developed every year in this industry. The rapid developments happening in mobile technology create new segments of phones every year. These innovations have made the mobile industry very dynamic. It has become more and more

competitive, with new players entering the Indian market. Mobile phone technologies become obsolete faster, forcing companies to innovate more quickly. Faster obsolescence has led to a shorter life cycle for the products.

4. The Competitive Landscape

The competitive landscape of mobile phone market has also changed considerably from 2009 to 2016. During the decade 2001-2010 Nokia was the undisputed market leader and enjoyed nearly 65% of the market share. Nokia lost its ground eventually, and in 2012 Samsung emerged as the new market leader. Samsung Electronics acquired 31.5% of the market share, and Nokia got 27.2% during FY12-13 (Voice and Data, 2013).. Many other Indian companies also entered the mobile phone segment around 2010. Over the years, these companies have gained considerable market share in the industry. Few Indian players had a market share of around 10% each from 2012 until 2015².

The industry classifies mobile phones broadly into three categories:

1. High-end smartphones (> ₹35,000), dominated by Apple and Samsung;
2. Medium-range smartphones (₹10,000 - ₹35,000), dominated by Samsung, Oppo, and Vivo;
3. Low-end smartphones and feature phones (< ₹10,000), dominated by Samsung and intense competition among various Indian and Chinese vendors.

Feature phones provide voice calling and text messaging functionalities in addition to basic multimedia (FM radio, music, etc.) and internet facilities. Smartphones have an operating system and can run many third-party software applications. Feature phones are available in the price range below Rs.2000. Smartphones are available at prices higher than Rs.3000. Not long ago, Indian mobile phone manufacturers predominantly targeted the lowest strata of the mobile phone market, that is, feature phones. Their go-to-market strategy used to be to penetrate the market with ultra-low costs, keep the quality average, and just sell to what they perceived as the ignorant people of the hinterland. However, this strategy has started to reveal its myopic vision and failing in the face of renewed competition.

² Government of India's Import Data

The entry of Chinese smartphone makers such as Xiaomi, Vivo, and Oppo has made the Indian mobile phone industry very competitive. Earlier, Indian companies imported Chinese phones and sold them in the Indian market. Then Chinese smartphone makers entered the fast-growing Indian market at the first opportunity; they are known for having deep pockets. Their high spending capabilities arise from the fact that most of them are implicitly or explicitly owned or supported by the Chinese government. The Chinese state links their strategic foreign policy influence with the success of their own companies and hence, leaves no stone unturned in making sure that Chinese companies perform well in foreign countries. Owned by China's BBK Electricals, both Vivo and Oppo entered the Indian market in 2014 (Mukharjee, 2017)

New data from India Rating and Research presents some damning statistics for Indian smartphone manufacturers. In Q1 2016, Indian vendors held a 41% share of the Indian smartphone market, while Chinese vendors held a 15% share (Krishnatry 2017). However, within a year the Indian vendors' share fell dramatically, to 14% in Q1 2017 (see Exhibit 5). In the same year, the Chinese companies tripled their market share, a serious cause of concern for the Indian players. There is a well-thought-out strategy behind this drastic change in the competitive landscape. Some of the more evident reasons are as follows:

- **Effective Marketing:** One of the biggest factors behind the success of the Chinese manufacturers is their large-scale and well-funded marketing campaigns. Billboards advertising Oppo and Vivo have suddenly cropped up in every nook and corner of the Indian hinterland. The Chinese companies are sponsoring big-ticket events like Indian Premier League (IPL), and celebrities such as Virat Kohli and Ranveer Singh are now their brand ambassadors.
- **Offline Sales Strategy:** The biggest eye-opener is the unprecedented success of Chinese companies in the rural and offline markets of India, which used to be a lucrative hunting ground for Indian smartphone manufacturers. A large part of India still has very limited access to the internet. People largely prefer buying smartphones offline, in brick and mortar stores. Companies like Vivo and Oppo are opening up numerous stores and service centers across India, even in remote rural regions. Oppo alone has nearly 35,000 stores across India. These stores are under direct control of the company itself, not run by third-party retailers (Borde 2017).

- **Transition to 4G:** The Indian telecom industry has undergone a revolution over the past year. Reliance 4G brought high-speed internet to the masses and forced incumbent telecom providers to lower their costs significantly. As a result, there has been an exploded demand for 4G VoLTE-enabled smartphones. Chinese vendors took advantage of this vacuum by flooding the market with high-quality, yet affordable 4G handsets.
- **Better Technology:** While most Indian vendors have had only limited experience with smartphone production in their home country, Chinese vendors have a greater global presence, especially in their home country. Their larger budgets and greater experience means that they have access to better technology, and thus can produce higher quality products. As a result, Chinese vendors are offering better-built phones with better specs and lower prices as compared to Indian vendors.
- **Focus on Desirable Features:** Chinese vendors have studied the Indian market deeply. They are focusing on what Indian consumers want from their smartphones, and providing exactly that. Dual SIM capability and removable storage are a couple of notable examples. However, the biggest example of this is surely their focus on selfie cameras. Camera quality on Chinese phones is generally good across the board, with 62.2% having a resolution of 13 megapixel or higher.
- **Indianizing Themselves:** A huge factor driving the success of Chinese vendors is how well they have integrated with the Indian culture and mind-set. Xiaomi co-founder Lin Bin spoke about his desire for Xiaomi to “become a truly Indian company.” A crucial manifestation of this is the extensive language support provided by Chinese companies. Multiple regional language support extends the reach of Chinese companies to even more regions of India. This is especially the case in regions where English and Hindi are not prevalent.

In a nutshell, the Chinese players are well-entrenched in the Indian market, and it will be an uphill task for Indian vendors to compete with them. Each of the Chinese vendors offers fewer models of phones in every category than their Indian counterparts, yet they are able to charge higher prices and are eating away the market share.

5. Report Findings

After a thorough analysis of the current situation, Gaurav's team came up with some key insights. After going through the report, Gaurav has identified three major areas of concern: product portfolio rationalization, customer perception and quality concerns, and market segments' rationalization.

5.1 Product Portfolio Rationalization

Since its inception, LAVA has predominantly catered to the segment of phones with market operating prices (MOPs) of less than Rs.10000. To maintain its competitive advantage, LAVA needs to regularly launch newer, upgraded versions of its mobiles. The company has been trying to cater to the kind of value-conscious consumers who always seek better features at lower prices. Sometimes product managers strike a good deal with the vendors and launch a model at a lower price compared to a model with comparable features that already exists in the market. The newer model then “eats” the existing phone market, leading to an inventory pile-up of the previous model. If product managers do not launch new models regularly, their competition may introduce better products and eat into LAVA's market share and revenue.

From 2009 to 2015, LAVA India continuously added newer models to its kitty. At the end of 2015, LAVA had around 50 models in both feature phones and smartphones. In comparison, the Chinese companies have large marketing budgets and fewer models. For example, Xiaomi has around six models, and currently has the second-highest market share after Samsung.

A market survey by LAVA in 2016 revealed that retailers were interested in stocking only nine or 10 models of any particular brand. LAVA decided to significantly rationalize its product portfolio and retain only nine feature phones and seven smartphone models in FY16.

Feature phones: The feature phones segment was divided into six further segments (Segments A to F) based on a combination of screen sizes and battery capacity (three screen sizes and two battery capacities). Based on the size of the segments, it was decided to have two models each in segments A, B, and C and one model each in segments D, E, and F. The models were chosen based on their historical sales data. Once the models were chosen, a pilot project was run in a

small region. The results of the pilot run were positive, and the company decided to go ahead with these nine models.

Smartphones: The smartphone segment was divided into four more segments (S1, S2, S3, and S4). LAVA operates in the price range of Rs.3000 to Rs.10000. While choosing the smartphone models, the company ensured that all the customer price points were covered, there was no cannibalization, and all the propositions were noticeably different from each other. It retained two models each in segments S1, S2, and S3, and one model in segment S4. After finalizing the choice of the seven models, LAVA ran a pilot project in a territory, and the idea proved to be successful.

The investigative report gave the average market growth rates of various segments, as well as smartphone and feature phone segments' sales figures for FY16 (see Exhibits 6, 7, and 8). These numbers will prove to be the moment of truth for the product rationalization initiative, and Gaurav wants a clear answer to the question "Has product rationalization worked in favor of the company?" He realizes that he will have to analyze the segment sales data to answer this question. He is also struggling to identify which market segments are performing well for the company and which are not.

5.2 Customer Perception and Quality Concerns

Customers perceived LAVA's product quality to be less consistent than that of its competitors. The quality across models varied, as LAVA had multiple vendors. Currently, LAVA was dealing with around 14 vendors to manage its vast product portfolio. The multitude of vendors was making standardization and quality control difficult for LAVA. It was unable to standardize mobile phone parts, as the projects were spread across multiple vendors. LAVA was not able to realize many benefits of the supply chain, as there was no consolidation of projects. As a result, its logistical costs were also higher than those of some of its competitors.

After the product portfolio rationalization in FY16, Gaurav took some initiatives to overcome marketing and sales and distribution challenges.

- He decided to hold a training session for the sales team at least once every month. With the reduced product portfolio and the company's renewed focus on smartphones, a well-

trained sales team – who could highlight the USP of the products and sell to premium outlets – would be absolutely essential.

- A few models were not selling well in particular regions. In such cases, the team would create region-specific retailer schemes.
- Schemes were planned for distributor sales executives (DSEs), who are the distributors' employees.
- More below the line (BTL) promotional activities were planned to increase the company's penetration into the rural market.
- The sales team was told to put more effort into increasing distribution width by bringing more distributors on board.

However, the less-than-flattering perception of LAVA mobile phones' quality still persists. Furthermore, it is also affecting the brand equity of the company. The report points out that even though LAVA now has many excellent smartphone product offerings, in customers' minds its products are still synonymous with cheap, low-quality mobile phones. Gaurav suspects that the problem does not lie in the actual quality of the phones – which is at par with the best offerings of their competitors – but with marketing. Not long ago the Chinese companies had a similar problem in the Indian market. However, recently they completely overcame consumers' negative perception with superior branding. Gaurav pauses here for a moment and wonders whether the time is ripe to revisit the whole marketing and branding initiative of the company?

5.3 Customer Segmentation

The traditional market segment for LAVA has always been the customers who buy feature phones, but the company has slowly made its presence felt in the smartphone segment as well. In fact, the smartphone sales revenue has been surpassing that of feature phone since FY13. The smartphone segment also contributes more to the company's bottom line. However, LAVA is still playing at the lower end of the smartphone market, where margins are low. Furthermore, in addition to the usual threat from Chinese competitors, the smartphone category has additional formidable competitors, like Samsung and Apple. Notwithstanding the importance of the smartphone category, the company cannot afford to lose sight of its traditional forte, the feature phone market. The price conscious feature phone customers, being emboldened by cheap data plans' availability, are increasingly demanding more value for their money (more features even

in feature phones) and are rapidly moving towards smartphones. However, the feature phone market is still huge and is driven by volume. The competition is messy, and margins are low. In future, Gaurav wants to further cut down feature phone product offerings and concentrate on only a few “high market share - high/stable growth” products and segments.

The company’s segmentation, targeting, and positioning (STP) strategy must be spot-on if it is to overcome the multitude of challenges. Gaurav remembers his Marketing Management lectures during MBA on STP and portfolio analysis using the BCG growth-share matrix. The requirements for effective segmentation are that the segment should be *measurable, substantial, accessible, differentiable, and actionable*. Furthermore, a profitable segment should ideally have *high market growth rate and substantial relative market share*. However, he is finding it difficult to make sense of the market segment data in front of him to come up with few insights which would help him zero in on a profitable and growing target segment.

6. The Decision

Gaurav wonders if there is a better way to manage his product portfolio. Exiting some segments at a time when the market share and revenue are under pressure may be a risky strategy. Another challenge is how many segments the company should focus on, and which? Can his company mimic the Chinese companies’ strategy and rework its whole marketing strategy to beat the Chinese in their own game? Gaurav is struggling to foresee a clear roadmap for LAVA over the next 2 to 5 years. Will they remain a market challenger, or exit from some segments, or can they become a market leader? How?

Gaurav knows that the meeting with the top management is crucial for the future of the company and that time is running out. Right now his mind holds more questions than answers. He must get his act together and, in a week, devise a marketing strategy for the company’s survival and growth.

Exhibit 1: LAVA Sales figures

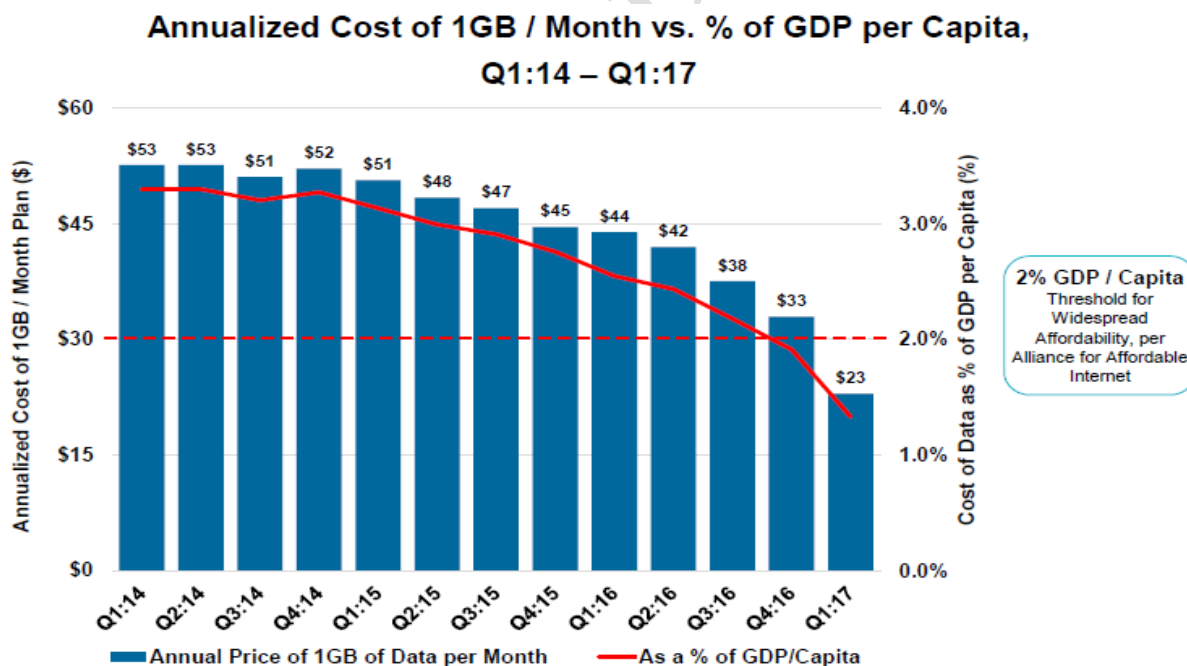
Year	Feature phones		Smartphones	
	Vol(in lakhs)	Rev(in Cr)	Vol(in lakhs)	Rev(in Cr)
FY10	13.8	307		
FY11	34.46	713		
FY12	27.58	539	0.03	2.05
FY13	55.47	772	1.83	76.02
FY14	105.56	1283	13.1	574.02
FY15	155.57	1669	37.77	1631
FY16	177.06	1767	54.96	2277.9

LAVA Market Share (Overall Mobile Handset Market):

Year	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Market Share by Rev.	1.6%	2.1%	4.4%	8.6%	9.7%	8.5%

Source: LAVA International Ltd.

Exhibit 2: Annualized Cost of 1GB/Month vs. % of GDP per capita, Q1:14 – Q1 17



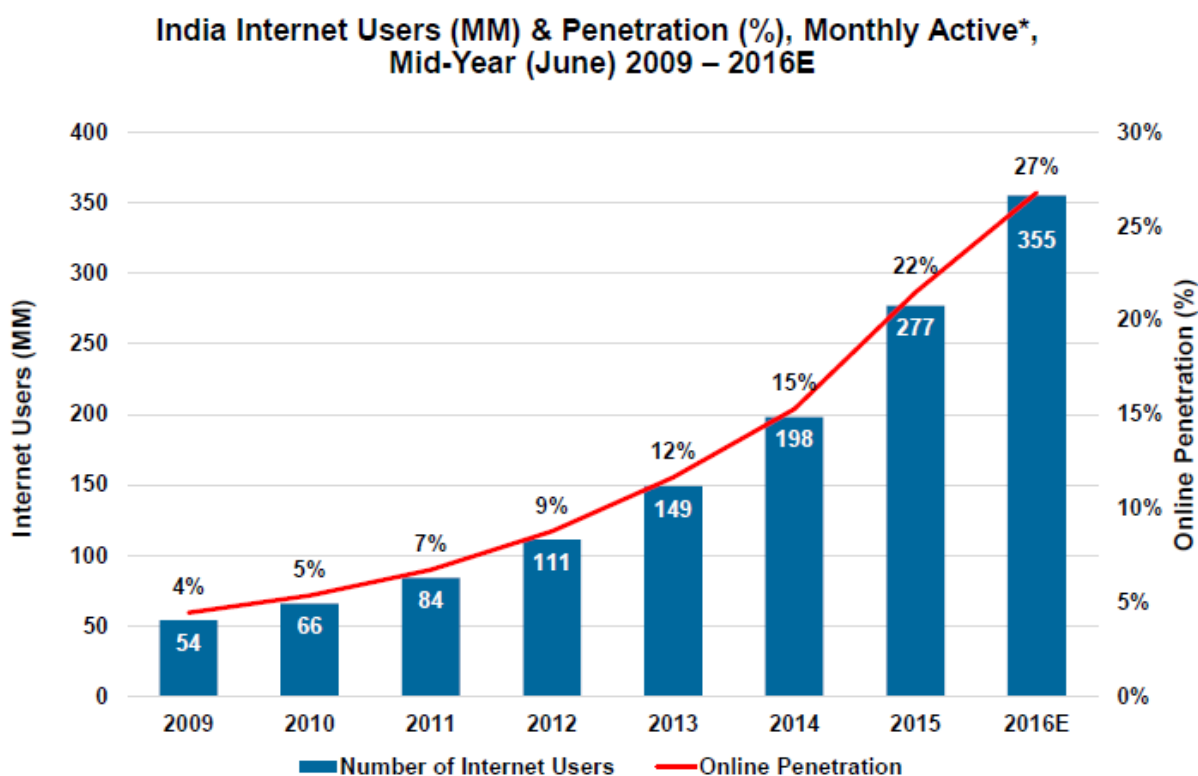
Source: (Meeker, 2017)

Exhibit 3: Mobile Handset Sales Forecast in India

Mobile Communications (India 2017-2020)				
	2017	2018	2019	2020
Overall Mobile handset sales, Cr. Rs.	19919.3	21712.1	23079.9	24441.6
Overall Mobile handset sales vol., '000	300869.0	309896.0	317333.5	324314.8
Smartphone sales, USD mn	18009.4	20008.4	21569.1	23122.0
Smartphone sales vol., '000	153311.2	175274.7	197593.1	218685.7

Source: (BMI Research, 2016)

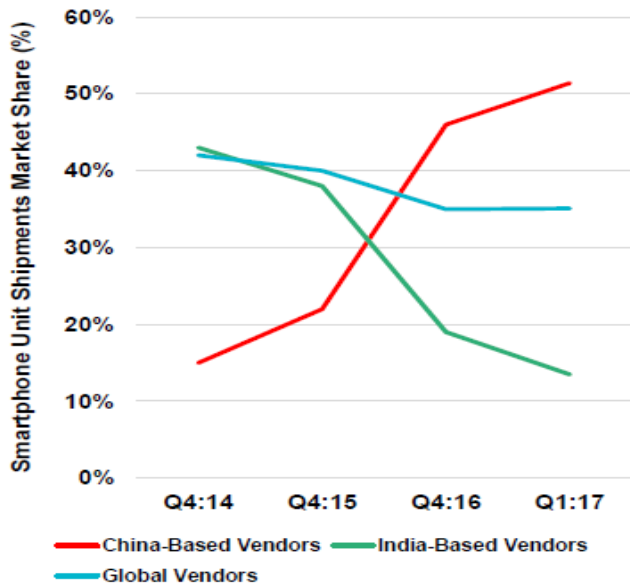
Exhibit 4: India Internet Users



Source: (Meeker, 2017)

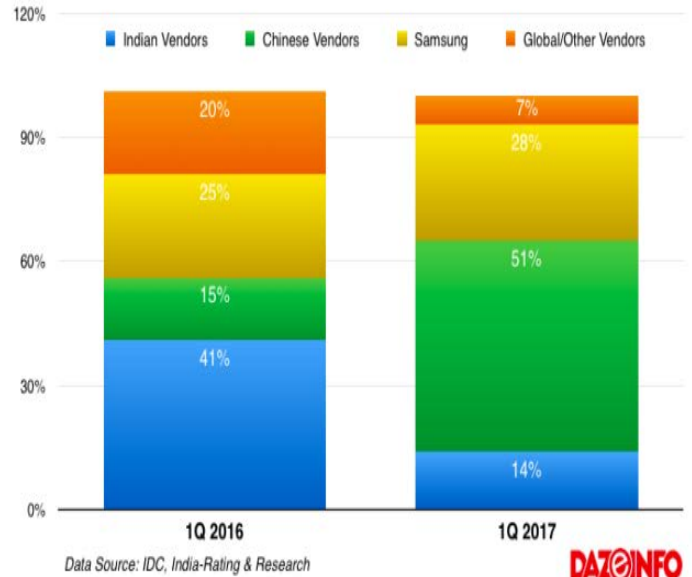
Exhibit 5: Competitive Landscape

India Smartphone Shipments Market Share by Vendor Country of Origin (%), Q4:14 – Q1:17



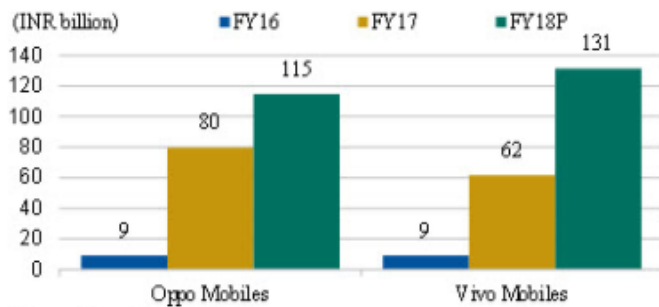
Source: (Meeker, 2017)

India Smartphone Market Share by Vendors



DAZINFO

Ind-Ra Rated Chinese Mobile Companies (Revenue in INR billion)



Source: Oppo, Vivo, Ind-Ra



Mobile Phone Vendor Highlights - India

Vendor Group	Q4 2016		Vendor Group	CY 2016	
	Market Share	QoQ Growth		Market Share	Annual Growth
Samsung	26.0%	-9.3%	Samsung	24.2%	9.0%
Transsion	7.5%	32.5%	Micromax	10.1%	-20.5%
Intex	7.1%	-41.3%	Intex	9.9%	-13.3%
Lava	7.0%	-42.3%	Lava	9.0%	-11.4%
Micromax	5.8%	-46.8%	Karbonn	5.3%	-17.7%

Source: IDC Quarterly Mobile Phone Tracker, Q42016

Note - Mobile Phone Vendor share includes both feature phone and smartphones

Exhibit 6: Average market growth rate across various segments for the year 2016

Feature phones		Smartphones	
Segment	Market growth rate	Segment	Market growth rate
A	-10%	S1	-14.16%
B	6.71%	S2	50%
C	-33%	S3	40.88%
D	-7.20%	S4	50%
E	24%		
F	-21.35%		
G	-1.78%		
H	371.32%		

Source: Imports Data

Exhibit 7: Feature Phones Market Segments' Sales in 2016

Feature Segments	Phone	Segment Size: No of Units	Market Leader Volume (No)	LAVA Volume (No)	LAVA Revenue (Rs.)
A - 1.8LB		126280181	24394496	9590337	8151786141
B - 1.8 BB		33193278	3389475	3227085	3114136947
C - 2.4 LB		30960580	5220516	2150014	2365015479
D - 2.4 BB		50902865	6246986	1767439	2120926853
E - 2.4 SBB		16038530	2116769	222755	334131966
F - 2.8 LB		14211289	5681617	394753	710555784
G - 2.8 BB		12712461	1987336	264840	609131338
H - 2.8 SBB		6395814	1471746	88778	265002330

Source: Adapted from Imports Data

Exhibit 8: Smartphone Market Segments' Sales in 2016

Feature Segments	Phone	Segment Size: No of Units (2016)	Market Leader Volume 2016	LAVA Volume	LAVA Revenue (Rs.)
S1		29233662	9129752	2631030	9208603455
S2		40656731	31919905	1492102	6416038766
S3		24438171	7699986	843116.9	4637142954
S4		35336436	16966405	530046.5	4505395578

Source: Adapted from Imports Data

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