

“Burnett will have 5-6 contenders at Cannes”

Leo Burnett India subcontinent chairman Sharma does away with complexity in creatives, finds Payal Khandelwal

HEADLINER

Arvind Sharma, chairman of India subcontinent, Leo Burnett, wrote the well-known campaign for Coldarin, ‘Yeh kya haal bana rakha hai’ while in a taxi when he was working at Clarion McCann. In spite of being a part of the client servicing team, Sharma thoroughly enjoyed his copywriting skills. “Those were the days when the separation between the servicing and creative side wasn’t very rigid. I enjoyed my Hindi copywriting skills and the consumer side of the business. However, it was quite hard in some ways as some of the clients were very demanding. So, there were both sides to the business, but it was enough to keep me excited,” he says.

After four years, he shifted to Chaitra Leo Burnett and has been through the entire transition of the agency to Leo Burnett as we know it today. “At the core of it lies the transformation from a client service business (just to keep the client happy) to an accountable business. A part of being able to deliver results to clients is rooted in the understanding of consumers and this needs a certain caliber of people. So, I had to set up the whole planning function,” he says.

“The creative department became very critical. There was a re-orientation from a bunch of creative people who knew what a client would buy to creative people who knew what would excite the consumer to people who knew what would cut through in the advertising environment. Our client portfolio underwent a complete transition as well.”

He adds, “Most importantly, the orientation of the agency changed from ‘let’s give the client what he wants so that he’s happy’ to ‘do the best advertising in the world’. How do you know if the piece of advertising that you have done is good? One way to know that is the health of the client’s business. But then the question



Leo Burnett’s Sharma benchmarks his agency against global standards and the best competitors

arises that could the brand have done better if the advertising was better or stronger? For that, you have to benchmark yourself against global standards and the best competitors.”

For the year ahead, Sharma has identified three major challenges at Leo Burnett. “I feel that complexity is not very good for quality of the creative product. While the client’s needs in terms of services will continue to become more complex, making sure that each brand has a simple enough definition for the quality of creative product to be outstanding is a challenge. The second challenge is to make sure that we continue to develop various pillars of our marketing services in a profitable manner.”

According to Sharma, the third challenge is to make sure that there are people who make all of this happen. To tackle this particular problem, he has a very clear strategy at Leo Burnett. “Our strategy has been to get a rela-

The lowdown

- 2007** Chairman, India subcontinent, Leo Burnett
- 2001** Chairman and CEO, Leo Burnett
- 1996** Managing Director, Leo Burnett
- 1983** Account Director, Chaitra Leo Burnett
- 1979** Sr Account Executive, Clarion McCann
- 1977** Management Trainee, Voltas

tively more focused portfolio of clients. We have always avoided clients who demand a lot of work and then in return, pay poor compensation. As a result of that strategy, we have always been able to pay our people better. We have always opted for bigger assignments and assignments which stay with us for a longer term, where we can make a continuing difference to the client’s business. We have also tended to prioritize competency over the number of years in the business. So, on the whole, we give our people faster career growths.”

However, he believes that getting the right people on board is a big challenge. “In a people’s business, if you have grown at 21-22% last year, probably you would have grown by over 30% if you had a bigger pool of outstanding people. Spotting the right people, bringing them on board, making sure that they are getting the right exposure and making sure that they are getting emotionally nur-

tured through tough phases is very important.”

Looking ahead, Sharma feels that in the digital medium, the challenge lies in creating viable business models. “There are lots of exciting things which one can do to get awards. However, the real challenge is to figure out sustainable strategies for clients and agencies. There is a lot of talk of Web 2.0 but making each Web 2.0 initiatives possible requires finding the right technology partners. We will stick to our core strength which is ideas and putting those ideas in shapes and forms. We will probably leave the execution to the technology guys. We are not scrambling to say that we need to have the biggest digital presence in 2008 but our focus is going to be on a sustainable model.”

While the industry is gearing up for Cannes 2008, Sharma doesn’t see a very strong Cannes contender in the film category from India this year. “On the other hand, the industry almost does most of its best work in the month of December which gets released in the months of January and February.” As far as Leo Burnett is concerned, he says, “I particularly like the work that we have done for Perfetti and there are a number of good pieces in the print medium. I think we will have about 5-6 contenders at Cannes this year from Leo Burnett.”

In a recent development, the Ad Club and AAI have arrived at an agreement over hosting the Abbyss which will take place at Goafest this year. Sharma, who is the chairman of the Goafest committee, sees this as a new era for the industry. “Advertising festivals are very important for the industry. It is such a soft skill business that unless you are constantly inspired by the works of other people, it is very easy to settle down into mediocrity. The Goafest is designed to allow the people from the industry to mingle with each other and with people around the world. This association is a good step for the industry. In the long run, we will have to continuously evolve both the festival format and the awards format.”

CHATTER

“It is so stressful coming into my stores. All I see are mistakes.”

Kishore Biyani, CEO, Future Group

“Just getting people into a metal box with four wheels and getting them off of motor scooters and mopeds and ox carts and stuff like that is already an enhancement of their personal safety.”

Bob Lutz, Vice Chairman, GM

“The only way any sport, not only cricket, can be viable is through the league system, which, during the peak season, has matches played every week.”

Alyque Padamsee

“We all are all ‘arm chair cricketers’. We all have a point of view of who should have been selected and who should have been kicked out in the final team.”

Alok Kejriwal, CEO, games2win.com

“Why just me? There are many credible people Prannoy Roy and his team, and Sameer Nair and his team. And then there’s me. We definitely make for a multi-star cast.”

Karan Johar