



My Life Off Advertising

PRATIK THAKAR

By Payal Khandelwal

"If everything seems under control, you are not going fast enough." In the middle of the phone interview, Pratik Thakar, vice president—Pacific group creative & content excellence at the Coca-Cola Company (based in China) quotes Mario Andretti. This particular line seems to bind the entire conversation about his life that preceded and followed it into one seamless thread. This has been an almost conscious manifesto of the extremely fascinating professional journey that he has charted so far, which in turn is intricately linked to the person he is.

Thakar grew up in Ahmedabad where his father had a job with the All India Radio (AIR) and his mother was a radio artist. Thus, he was connected to the world of art and music right from his childhood. Words like programming, artists, live music etc. were scattered in his everyday conversations with his parents. His father's hobbies of reading, collecting autographs and stamps were also some of the early influences in his life. My father used to contribute to the United States Information Service and therefore used to read books and magazines of all genres and almost all newspapers. And eventually, this inculcated the habit of reading and being curious about art, culture and life in general in me too."

Studies and Thakar did not really have a cordial relationship. He hated school and most of his teachers, he confesses. With the aim of fulfilling the basic Indian education demand, he decided to at least graduate. "In my family, everyone was doing really well in terms of education and I was the only odd one out. There was this initial pressure from my family and peer group which led me to finally choose Biochemistry as an option." He had the option of studying either Physics or Chemistry but the latter attracted him more as it allowed more time to be spent doing experiments in labs rather than being cocooned in a classroom.

Along with his Biochemistry studies, the lure of making some pocket money took him to various market research agencies where he would earn about Rs 60–80 per day. What seemed like an inconspicuous part-time job at that time was actually the beginning of a lifelong journey centered on understanding consumers and brands. However, right from the beginning, he did have a strong inkling that this stream of his life was serious, interesting and had a potential



future. This phase also introduced him to Mudra Communications in Ahmedabad which used to often hire him for freelance market research jobs. Gradually, his interest started trickling towards the world of advertising. "When I saw Mudra's office and their creative work, I found it quite interesting."

Post his graduation, there came a rather dark period in Thakar's life where he had to come to terms with his father's recent death. As the only other male member of his family, he had to adopt the responsibility of doing something "serious". By this time, however, he was quite sure of his deep interest in consumers and brands and thus, he decided to get a formal degree in marketing.

In Ahmedabad, Thakar worked for Pressman Advertising and Mudra which were both critical early experiences of his professional life. "Pressman was an amazing experience and had a huge impact in my life. It was a very large agency in India at that time. It had a niche category of financial advertising and was a market leader in that." Even though he wanted to work in creative hotshops like Trikaya, Ambience and Enterprise Nexus, most agencies ironically eluded him that time as his background was market research. Pressman gave him a job on the condition that he would finish his marketing degree during his probation period.

"At Pressman, I was dealing with people who were coming up with public issues—entrepreneurs, businessmen, merchant bankers and all this involved high level business strategies." Pressman, at that time, was handling clients like Tata, Birla, Reliance, Adani etc. and Thakar used to travel with senior people from these companies. This gave him a great understanding of how people actually do businesses. Pressman's



founder Dr. Suchanti was another influential figure in his life. “I started dealing with him when the business grew. He probably saw the potential in me and began to groom me.”

After this, Mudra hired him as a full-time employee in the market research space. He then started realizing that he can’t really grow till he goes to Mumbai so he decided to shift base. He got a job offer from Pathfinders, the market research company of Lintas India. At Pathfinders, he got to learn about strategic planning from consumer and qualitative research angles.

The urge to work for a “creative agency” lurked around again and coincidentally, he got an offer from Saatchi & Saatchi which had newly acquired a local agency, Sista. V Shantakumar, who was the CEO and chairman of Saatchi at that time, interviewed the 26 year old Thakar and gave him the mandate of creating a proper planning function in the agency. “Shantakumar’s views on creativity and strategy were quite appealing. It was a great opportunity for me as I was the first strategic planner formally appointed by Saatchi India.”

Being with the right people at the right time has been one of the biggest reasons of his highly successful expedition at each agency he has worked at. At Saatchi, Shantakumar supported him in his endeavor to create a culture of planning in the agency. “He was always a creative led person and quite strategic too. He was very passionate about insights and ideas which inspired me. Mentors like him made my life easier and I believe that I have always been at the right time with the right people.”

At Saatchi, Thakar realized that he had the knack of understanding consumers and not just making research presentations. “I was good at converting insights into ideas. When I talked ideas with the creative, they liked it because I was speaking their language and helping them sell great creative work. That became my strength and made me successful with the creative community.” For him, the biggest learning from Saatchi was that planners need to be responsible for creating great work and they need to be partners in producing outstanding creative output too.

Thakar was sent to Hong Kong for his induction into the Saatchi system. Soon, he also started travelling to Greater China for Saatchi’s work. This is an important part of his life for a number of reasons. To celebrate Saatchi’s tenth anniversary in China, he went for a big insight hunting exploration and roadshow with his then



Thakar at Cannes

APAC head of strategy and a *TIME* magazine photographer. He travelled to the interiors of China including tier 3-4 towns (and villages) for about 8000 km in a number of buses, boats and trains. “It was kind of an ethnography — looking at people, culture and society — visiting small schools, farms and hospitals, taking pictures, observing, studying and living life like those people.” It was a dramatically different experience for a vegetarian Gujarati boy that Thakar was. The biggest upside was that this experience made him see everything from different angles.

He then came back to India and soon got an offer from McCann Worldgroup Malaysia which was completely restructuring its top management in Malaysia and approached Thakar with



2013 Cannes' stage —
Creative Marketer of the Year



the position of planning head. When asked about the experience of moving lock, stock and barrel to another country, Thakar confesses that this move was way easier than moving from Ahmedabad to Mumbai. "The move to Mumbai was definitely the most challenging part of my life. I was leaving my mother alone so it was emotionally quite stressful. Also, in Mumbai, I initially lived in Vasai and worked in Churchgate and travelling by local trains was not a great experience. Mumbai can be really tough at times." He was newly married at that time and his wife (whom he met at Mudra, Ahmedabad) was from an affluent background and disliked living "a stressful and lower middle-class lifestyle" with him. While work-wise he did enjoy Mumbai but life-wise, Kuala Lumpur and other cities were much more comfortable, he says.

While his stint in McCann Malaysia was successful, he felt that the Southeast Asian market was a bit out of radar and not a priority for the global system. McCann Worldgroup's worldwide chief strategy officer, Eric Einhorn, took note of Thakar's talent and started involving him in many high profile China oriented projects. He started travelling to China to handle strategic assignments in 2007 and by the end of that year, his boss decided to move him to China completely as the chief strategy officer and mandated him with the task of integrating various units within the large McCann system. "This was an interesting time for me. I hired a lot of talented Chinese people for my team to understand the culture better. And this was just before the Olympics so I got to work on some very large Olympic campaigns for brands like Puma, Coca Cola, Mastercard etc. So on one side I was building agency resources and on the other, strategic campaigns for big brands."

China is indeed a very unique market with its own set of challenges. But Thakar has a different perspective on it. "I saw China from a very different angle than any other foreigner. A lot of people complain that China is not creating great TVCs and thus, is not a very good advertising market. But the world is changing

beyond TVCs and that's exactly why China is important. Just like how the new generation hasn't seen landline phones and directly graduated to cellphones, China hasn't seen much TV advertising but directly moved to digital. There is a lot of innovation coming out of China." The other factor why he loves this market is that China is growing exceedingly fast and thus, there is no limitation of budgets and overall ambition.

'Being at the right time with the right people' once again came into play. At Greater China, Thakar has worked with some of the most creative and influential people including Carol Lam, Spencer Wong, Tomaz Mok, and Canon Wu. Apart from these, a person who had an enormous influence on his life is TH Peng who is often known as the godfather of Chinese advertising. Peng was his boss at McCann, and later at Grey too.

At McCann everything was going absolutely fine and Thakar had spent around ten years there. But since everything was under "control", there came a sort of a plateau and the question was 'what next'. Two critical things happened which led to him to his next destination, Grey Group. One of the senior guys from McCann's US office moved to Grey (Jim Heekin who is now the global CEO) and invited Thakar's boss Peng to be a part of the Grey's Greater China's operations. Around the same time, McCann had a new global CEO with whom both Peng and he had ideological differences. This is when both of them decided to move to Grey.

Turning around an agency's business, operations and revenue is second nature to Thakar, it seems. Interestingly Peng, in an interview to Campaign Brief Asia, once said that Thakar has the ability to connect dots in new



With TH Peng

ways and called him a “multi-faceted strategist”. Grey, which was hitherto quite low profile in that market, soon saw a surge in new talent, new business and its revenue. It became one of the fastest growing WPP agencies in China. Personally for Thakar, it all boils to a very simple thing — connecting with people and more importantly, connecting with local people in the market. This is easy for him as he comes from a humble middle class background, he says.

Eventually as Grey was flourishing, Mario Andretti’s words were echoing in Thakar’s ears. He mentions on his LinkedIn profile — “Everything was going well, everything felt perfect, so decided to jump the ship and enter the totally different world of The Coca-Cola Company.” He decided this after a lot of drinks, coffee and conversation with TH Peng who as a boss didn’t want to let go of him, but as a friend motivated him to experiment. “Everything was right about the Coca-Cola’s role and so it was an easy decision to make. The difficult part was to leave Grey and TH Peng.”

The last few months at Coca-Cola have been exciting for him. “This is kind of a new role I am building so I am going back to my Pressman and Saatchi days for inspiration. This is a non-conventional role; it’s more about selling a concept and convincing people about new ways to work.” Currently, he is in the process of understanding the culture of the company and has been travelling a lot in his region. Having worked with Coca-Cola as a client in the past has obviously helped. In fact, some of the work he had done for the company at McCann is what made him a strong contender for this role.

Interestingly, after years, he is no longer just a spectator of Indian advertising as it now falls under his region. About the Indian advertising landscape currently, he says, “I always look forward to watching great ads when I come to India. But that’s more of a nostalgic value. Interestingly, years back, I would want to see what Piyush, Praseen and Balki have come up with and this hasn’t changed even now. Aggie (Agnello Dias) used to create great campaigns in Leo Burnett and now he is leading Taproot and doing great work. So sadly, it’s more or less the same set of people. Also, I want to see some great digital work from India. There should be more innovation. Not just scam work for the awards but real innovation. I think India is capable of that. Probably, it is just not a priority right now.”

Thakar’s life beyond work is equally charming. At home, his world comprises of his wife and two children. “My children (aged 9 and 7) are



proud of me working at Coca-Cola. When they come to my office, they understand it’s creative and colorful and they know their father is doing something interesting and unconventional. They are growing in a truly multinational culture.” When asked if his wife shares Thakar’s zeal for exploring new markets and especially a market like China, he says, “She did have some apprehensions about coming to China but now she appreciates it. Unlike me, she is always in control and stable and that provides us a great balance. She has been working with Unilever China for the last five years as the consumer insight head for home care category and is extremely career oriented.”

Apart from hobbies like music and reading which he inherited from his childhood, a new activity that has become a passion over the years is scuba-diving. “I dive quite a lot and all over the world. It’s a completely different world out there. It is akin to meditation for me.” Probably, this is the ultimate secret of how Thakar manages to be so humble and balanced despite of his remarkably successful fast paced life, with no controls whatsoever.