

Digital Business Newsletter

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Talking to Aparna Subramanyam

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Commanding brand loyalty comes from knowing your 'why', a brand's reason for being. It's critical that brands define this overarching purpose .

You studied in England. How much has studying abroad helped you?

After I completed my undergraduate studies at Mount Carmel College, Bangalore, I applied to universities in England which afforded me the chance to specialize in marketing. I ended up choosing Manchester Business School for their curriculum and blended model of theoretical learning and practical experience.

The best part of studying abroad was getting to meet people from different backgrounds and working with them on projects. It shows you how to look at all perspectives and come to the table with a global outlook.

I loved the experience of studying in England but I always knew that I wanted to come back to India. There is a lot of scope and opportunity here because we are a developing economy. Upon my return, I worked with Unisys, setting up their marketing communications across India, China and Hungary. I lucked out - I got a very meaty role and had the opportunity to learn from the best managers and peers.

What happened after that first career break?

I spent about 4 years at Unisys and I learned a lot. But once the systems were in place, it was more about execution rather than conceptualisation. And I wanted the challenge of building a strategy from scratch. Working with an MNC also meant that there was only so much freedom when it came to executing on branding and communications. The global team usually set the guidelines and the different countries would have to adhere to them.

As a result, I wanted to start working with startups because it would afford me the chance to be part of



building a company from the ground up, and be involved in how it would present itself to the consumers. I started freelancing while being on the lookout for another full-time job with FMCG companies. It was never my intent that freelancing becomes a full time gig.

But it so happened that I started getting really interesting projects to work on and I learned so much working across different domains, with different companies, and different people. I advised the Govt. of Karnataka on an app that would bring govt. services to the common man, making it easier and more transparent for them to access what they needed. I worked on the launch of a British tea brand in India. Another huge plus point was not having to deal with the politics of working in a corporate. I was free to focus on my job, and only my job. And slowly, what was meant to be a temporary, freelance set-up became permanent. It's been 6 years now and I love that I get to choose the companies and projects I want. Instead of being a tiny cog in a giant wheel, working with smaller companies, nonprofits, and social impact organisations gives me the opportunity to truly make a difference in a significant way.

As a brand strategist what are you expected to deliver?

I usually work with my stakeholders to understand what they want to achieve. Being seen as different is the most important factor for brand returns. I identify how we can differentiate brands to give them a leg up in a competitive and crowded marketplace. I work with the organisations' leadership to understand what their value proposition is and how exactly this can be communicated to their intended target audiences.

Depending on the brand and business requirements of the organisations, I identify and manage design partners, digital marketing agencies, advertising agencies, PR partners, videographers, photographers, developers, to help deliver on the brand and communications assets. The assets include everything from consumer insights, brand naming, packaging strategy, website design strategy, UX narrative, brand storytelling, design direction for logo, visual language, brand positioning, brand voice, and how all of this translates to their digital marketing, social media marketing, public relations, etc.

I serve as the brand liaison between the different agency partners and the organisation to ensure that we build a cohesive brand across different functions to speak in a single brand voice to the customers.

Most of the organisations build a brand around what they want to give customers. But a really good brand will design a brand around what would add most value to the customer. The brands that succeed approach product, customer experience and marketing from a customer's point of view and tailor the brand accordingly. Customer delight is key to brand recall, Word of Mouth marketing and subsequently, brand loyalty. Case in point: Apple, Google, Airbnb.

Please talk about some projects where your ideas made a difference.

I recently worked with an organisation that partners

What does brand strategy mean to you?

Branding is everything about your company, not just the visuals and messaging. It's something that's created by every touchpoint of your company - online and offline. For example, branding for Apple is everything from their 'concert-like' sales events to launch a new product, their in-store education training to upskill their users, the ease through which you can order their products online and have it shipped the same day or the way people applaud when you leave their store with a purchase. Features and benefits don't sell - branding does. Most people mistakenly assume that brand strategy is just about a logo and business cards.

A brand strategy encompasses all the elements essential for long-term success. These include but are not limited to market research, competition analysis, audience mapping, positioning, values, voice, perception, and brand promise.

Together, these elements need to put forth a cohesive story that resonates with target consumers. I would start with defining the brand's:



Even if a company does not have all the answers at the start, the above are the questions that any brand exercise will have to first address. Once I have an idea of where the company wants to go in the short-term, medium-term, and long-term, I work backwards to build a brand that will help the company get there.

A few years ago, I worked with a boutique coffee brand from Chikmagalur to help them enter the crowded coffee space. The client was very young and this worked in our advantage because she was very open to experimentation, which isn't usually the case.

with Tata Memorial Centre and the National Cancer Grid to provide personalized cancer treatment plans online in 24 hours to patients anywhere in the world. When COVID19 hit, I recommended that we launch a free hotline for cancer patients across India who couldn't access cancer hospitals or doctors because of the country-wide lockdown. Since March 2020, the hotline has helped 6000+ patients access expert oncologists and get advice on their treatment regimen.

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I loved my experience of consulting for a children's

nonprofit publisher. They publish storybooks in mother tongue languages to ensure that children from underserved communities get a chance to improve their reading skills, and by extension, their literacy levels. Since the leadership of the nonprofit came from advertising backgrounds, they understood the importance and value of branding and communications and gave me full rein.

I led a redesign of their website and estore post which, their bounce rate came down by 50%, user engagement increased 3x, and sales doubled on the estore, thanks to the new user-friendly experience.

As part of a CSR grant, we also had the funds to market some of the STEM books we had published. Instead of doing a reading, I suggested we do murals of the pictures from the STEM books in government schools, allowing the kids to experience the artwork and add delight to the school-going experience. They greenlighted the suggestion and I identified a collective that employs the transgender community to create public art. They were delighted to come on board and it was such a fulfilling endeavour. We shortlisted 3 government schools across Karnataka, including one in a tribal region and spent days transforming one wall of a classroom into a mural depicting a scene from one of the storybooks.

It was a great experience for all involved, the principal, teachers, students and the transgender muralists. After an initial period of hesitation, everyone got along great and it was truly heartening to see the kids make friends with the muralists. They were openly curious and the transgender artists patiently answered their questions, without getting offended. Everyone pitched in with the painting with the muralists gently guiding the children on how to paint. It also contributed to a sense of ownership since the kids were involved in the creation of the mural. The artists were so grateful for having had the opportunity to make a difference and a chance to address misconceptions. They felt valued and respected, and I'd like to think this interaction went

some way to change attitudes about transgenders and their place in society.

Why do projects ‘fail’?

Branding is a long-term game focussed on growth, not quick wins. A successful brand needs time to grow. A lot of businesses do not think it through before they launch. They keep making changes as they go and that does a lot of damage. I am often called in to fix things despite having provided directions much earlier in the process. Organisations whose entire company culture is entirely focussed on continually improving their offering tend to perform better because they use every new product / service and customer interaction as an opportunity to learn, using facts to improve their products. This is also how they're able to anticipate their customers' needs. Emotional attachment to an aspect of the brand that is clearly not working in the organisation's favour will just do the brand harm in the long-run.

Commanding brand loyalty comes from knowing your 'why', a brand's reason for being. It's critical that brands define this overarching purpose and align entire teams and functions to deliver, enabling a sustained growth for years to come. In a world where it is increasingly hard to differentiate between products and services, brands need to give customers a clear reason to choose them over a competitor. If it's the same product or service in different packaging, customers are not going to stick around. One of the companies that I worked with had a great idea to leverage existing properties, like cafes, bars, restaurants, and turning them into co-working spaces during unused hours. Imagine coworking on demand. You didn't have to shell out a heavy deposit to work with a WeWork, etc. You just pay for when you work there. We did everything from brand nomenclature, designing their web and mobile platforms, defining user journey and experience, pricing strategies, photoshoots, et al. The only thing left was the launch. It required a

well thought out launch because this was a crowded market and the brand needed to stand out and make some noise. But unfortunately, the leadership simply didn't understand the value of planning a sustained digital and PR push to create buzz and visibility for the brand.

They assumed, as so many others do, that just because they've got a great idea, they didn't have to invest in selling the idea. In the end, despite all the efforts that went into building their brand, they sank without a trace because no one knew they existed. The lack of a clear vision and indecisiveness about the way forward really hurt their plans. To grow, brands must invest across the buyer lifecycle.

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How do you see your work evolving in the future?

COVID is going to change a lot of things in terms of brand perception and purchase. Because of the financial downturn, people are going to be more careful about where they spend their money. Great brands enable customers to see and feel what they stand for at every touchpoint and interaction. They make conscious decisions on where to focus their investments in the customer journey and they ensure to keep their promises. This cohesion between Brand and Customer Experience is not only vital to survive in a post-pandemic world, it also pays off financially.

In a phone-first world, attention is at a premium,

I love my work. I consult for a variety of nonprofits, social impact organisations, startups, corporates. It's a mixed bag, which means I'm constantly learning. I believe that we learn best when we're outside our comfort zones, and I make a conscious effort to pick projects that challenge me, and help me grow.

and competition is fierce. But the fact remains, 70% of online customers prefer learning about a new service or product through content over advertising. Thanks to COVID, the internet has assumed even more importance in expanding global visibility and reach. More and more companies are now understanding that going digital is no longer a choice. It's a must for survival. The higher the number of people that are able to access a brand, the higher is the awareness of the business. Expanding brand awareness will have to be a key priority for both emerging startups as well as established organisations. The number of times a brand gets seen is directly related to brand acknowledgement. Being present across different digital channels will lend itself to higher brand recognition.

Brand experiences will continue to be a draw as more millennials will choose to spend on experiences rather than things. Similarly, brands that focus on sustainability as a core tenet of their offerings will be able to build a more loyal community as consumers in a post-COVID world will not want to support companies that are perceived to be harming the planet.

I'm excited about the potential of immersive, ex-

periential media in helping to create 'rule breaker' brands and build momentum through differentiation, innovation, experimentation, and speed. This is truly the age of the consumer. Earlier, brands used to be whatever they told you they are. Today, brands are whatever customers think you are. This is why perception is key in determining the brand's journey.

What keeps you going as a person?

I love my work. I consult for a variety of nonprofits, social impact organisations, startups, corporates. It's a mixed bag, which means I'm constantly learning. I believe that we learn best when we're outside our comfort zones, and I make a conscious effort to pick projects that challenge me, and help me grow.

I enjoy the illusion of freedom that being an independent consultant affords me. I'm the master of my time. There are times I work all days of the week and all hours of the day but I'm choosing to do it. I pick the companies I want to work with, I'm choosy about my projects because I'm careful about how I spend my time and what I'm spending it on. It's the one resource that cannot be replenished.

I'm currently consulting for an education nonprofit that trains school leaders in government schools and affordable private schools, driving improved school and student outcomes. I'm heading brand and strategy for a social enterprise working to reimagine the potential of craft in India and what that would entail for the artisan economy. I'm also busy with a few, exciting FMCG projects. I feel lucky to be working on a variety of interesting projects across sectors, domains, and industries. The prospect of learning something new, and figuring out how to weave that into my work is what drives me.

Excerpts of a conversation with Kartik Isvarmurti, Managing Editor.

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