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Talking to Rohit Onkar

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There are four aspects which are extremely important in today's digital marketing world - technology orientation, content intonation, flair for marketing & love for numbers.

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With a creative yet analytical thought process, Rohit has been driving businesses to realize profits using digital marketing.



What got you interested in digital marketing?

Back in 2011, I got introduced to the world of digital marketing through a campus placement. I had done my Bachelors in mechanical engineering and got placed at a company called Convonix, through campus placement. During the orientation talk, I found digital marketing very interesting. I am inclined towards marketing and always felt that I was very active in college/school marketing activities.

When I first read about digital marketing and got an opportunity to sit for a campus interview I felt this was the thing for me. That is how digital marketing happened in my life.

In 2011, digital marketing was at a very nascent stage in India. So, there were hardly any opportunities to do a live project. I did get a week from the

pre-campus placement. During the week, I read whatever I could get my hands on about digital marketing, which I got through credible sources. I was fortunate that I got a job in the digital marketing space, at one of the rare places where we had a formal classroom training on digital marketing that lasted for 3 months. This helped me a lot, at least in the beginning.

It was very different from what it is now. Back then it was Artek and programmatic digital marketing etc. 2011 was an era where you did not even have Facebook as an advertising platform. 2011, especially in India, was an SEO dominated era. Even the google ads was called google AdWords back then. There wasn't a lot of media share for display. Terms like demand-type platforms and data management platforms were kind of unheard back then.

Would you say digital marketing is technology driven today and a person aspiring to enter the field should be more technology focused?

That is true. Having said that, there are four aspects which are extremely important in today's digital marketing world.

- 1. Technology Orientation:** You need to understand technology, Artek, Martek, etc.
- 2. Content Intonation:** You need to have content intonation as it is highly important considering the amount of clutter in today's digital world, which was not so in the last decade. So, an understanding of how to create content and an inclination towards content was required.
- 3. Flair for marketing:** You need to understand and have an aptitude for marketing in addition to love for content and technology.
- 4. Love for numbers:** You have to be data driven. If you are not data driven in today's world, it is going to be difficult to create a successful career in digital marketing.

Digital marketing today has married marketing, data and technology. It is like a three in one profile. If you have all the skill sets mentioned above, you are all set for growth.

What are some successful campaigns you worked you like to talk about?

One is an entire digital marketing campaign for Tata Mutual Funds. If you were to rewind to about 3-5 years, mutual fund as an industry did not enjoy the benefits of marketing that it enjoys today. I was fortunate enough to be a part of the Tata Mutual Fund team. We set up a digital character called Professor Simply Simple to simplify financial terms for people who would interact with people through all formats of digital marketing. With Tata Mutual Funds I had a lot of gadgets to play with; the challenge there was

using the budgets in the right direction and getting the most ROI for the amount you have invested. That is one campaign that I am really happy about.

Another one was a campaign I had done for a US-based B2B player. They are a management consulting firm, PI Worldwide. They have come up with a tool that is used by HR and sales to recruit the right kind of people. In this case, to reach out to people within different functions having different seniority levels; who will have different expectations from the products that they consume was a challenge in itself.

That is where I got introduced to the non-media side of digital marketing which I call the non-glamorous

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side of digital marketing. This was one of those projects where I did touch up on growth hacking where you do have large media budgets or the Universe to go after, & your niche was very small. But you have to reach out to people with relevant offerings.

So the idea of Professor Simply Simple, was the main innovation in the Tata Mutual Funds campaign?

Oh yes, absolutely! Most of the financial players today are so focused and obsessed at the bottom of the funnel that nobody talks about educating those at the top of the funnel. In an industry like mutual funds, where majority of your transactions are not happening from the asset management company,

You should think big!

there is an entire distribution chain where people are getting influenced by our communication and asking for your product. A surrogate form of marketing where you are introducing a character and talking to the character and subtly plugging in brand communications plays a very important role.

You mentioned about a non-glamorous side of digital marketing. What exactly is this?

For this, I will first define the glamorous side. The glamorous side allows you to reach out to a larger audience and the challenge there is to beat the clutter and helps you put sufficient money in media, run FB advertising, run ads on Tik Tok, YouTube, etc. You kind of feel powerful as a digital marketer because you have money to invest. There is also a direct ROI attribute so you feel excited and glamorous.

The non-glamorous side is when you are restricted to reach out to a niche and the niche is say about 1 lakh population that would ever need the concerned project in a particular demography that you have identified. To reach out to those people among the amount of data that is residing today in the digital marketing world is really difficult. It is like trying to find a needle in the haystack. There you do not have the luxury of a full-blown media plan. But, there you have to resort to growth-hack techniques like creating a small community of like-minded people and reaching out to them individually and getting them to be a part of that community. There is a lot of emphasis on SEO done in the right panel where you do not want people who are going to read about research or students who are in the management consultant domain to really come to our site. You want the content to appeal to those 1 Lakh people you have identified. It is sometimes very non-glamorous, the number of conversion and leads would be miniscule compared to the glamor-

ous side of things. You would have KPIs like create response, community growth, you would be very integrated with the sales team, each and every lead there is valuable and the sales cycle is longer.

You don't get those huge satisfying numbers like the glamorous side.

Can you talk about a campaign you worked on that went totally haywire?

At some point in my career we worked with Bajaj group, where we had to deal with a specific product, which was Bajaj Hair oil. With that product also, we went the community route - we thought of building a community who would want to talk about everything related to hair care, hair growth etc. We later realized that such a product needs a completely different approach because people are extremely sensitive when it comes to talking about skin and hair problems, online. So, the digital marketing approach for these needs to be very different from the integrated approach where one would use all channels.

For small entrepreneurs with limited budget wanting to do digital marketing, what suggestions you can give them?

1. One would be the connectivity to build processes. That should be the first step. You should think big. You should have a mindset to have an entire digital marketing set up right from day 1. Nothing should be done haphazardly. Even if you are spending Rs 25000 on Facebook, it should be done in the most professional manner possible so that it is easier to scale up as you grow. You should have things under control. To break it down, if we talk about SEO, have a set process and template where you are optimizing each and every page of your website. Let it be done in

a manner that it has to be done, rather than you talking to 10 different agencies/consultants and taking 10 different opinions and doing things haphazardly. Similarly, basic things like auditing the conversion on your website - these should be done right from the start. Don't keep these things for when you grow. Have a proper email marketing process in place even if the mailer list consists of just 100 people. This way when you grow big, you don't have to waste hours to bring processes in place.

2. The second advice is to have consistency. It is not important to put a large number to the budget - you don't have to spend 10 lakhs to Facebook. You may be spending Rs 10,000 on Facebook in a month, but do it consistently over a period of 6 months.

What are the challenges in working on campaigns for large companies?

There is a lot of trouble still in the industry. In my current role, I have worked with a lot of large brands. Majority of these large brands, without taking names, have a problem of their digital marketing team being either much disjointed from the business or consisting of people who moved in from other function of them business with little knowledge on digital marketing. It becomes very difficult for themselves to justify through the organization that this is your core function and not like an auxil-

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ary function which is good to have. So, majority of the functions, despite reading and understanding the benefits and investing in a full-fledged digital marketing unit are not able to run digital marketing in a way that they should be doing it. This can be due to skill-set issues or issues like seeing the unit as very different from their core business.

We have two verticals - tourism and FMCG. To add to that we are an integrated rural development organisation. It was mostly NGOs, etc. that operated in this space. Our advent attracted visibility because initially by default and now by design we changed this whole brand personality to a more exciting, vibrant, colourful space.

Is digital marketing important for large businesses that see bulk of their revenues coming from non-digital sources?

I wouldn't see it that way. In reality they wouldn't be measuring their revenue properly. To give you a very small example, as Indians there are things that we do not want to purchase online. There are products which we prefer buying from a store. When businesses say that majority of its revenue comes from offline initiatives, it is perhaps the data analysis from a BTL promotion or an ATL offline promotion, where they see their sales grow by say 50% or 60%. They are completely blind to the premise of people seeing an ad online before they make this purchase. Just because they are unable to measure that they claim that digital is 10% of their buy. I talk about this from a lot of experience.

For example, Lifestyle, has a digital platform sales as well which fares pretty decent. People may visit

that website and choose their product. But because of the consumer behaviour, they may end up coming to the store to finally make the purchase. This consumer has actually been influenced by the online communication but he converted the sales in the store. So, the number may not be giving you the right story. Most brands don't measure this influence on sales. The brands who do measure it have actually done a lot of justice to their marketing spends by optimizing it with online advertisements.

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I am certainly not of the opinion that people should stop offline promotion, but if their pie today is 90% in offline marketing and 10% in online marketing, one needs to rethink if an entire aspect of it that maybe is what they are missing out on. And, it doesn't take much to measure the online communication influencing their offline sales - it is a bit of technology and data analytics.

How do you think is digital marketing in the future headed?

I would answer this in two ways. On the paid advertisement front, I see the end of banner ads very

soon. Out of experience, majority of the success that we have had across our set of clients who run paid media campaigns on digital media are attributed to ads that doesn't really look like an ad. People don't click ads when it looks like ads. The minute it is integrated and looks like a part of the content on the website, you may perhaps move to be clicking the ad provided it is relevant to you. I do see ad formats going through a massive change.

On the pure content front, with the emergence of platforms like Tik Tok, I see the clutter increasing. But at the same time, as a brand if you are able to test and understand what kind of content your target audience prefer, you can stand out of the clutter.

Where do you see yourself in the next few years?

From the level I am at right now, in the natural progression that I would like to have I would see myself as:

1. A CMO of a large organization which has traditionally invested heavily in traditional advertising but they see the need to move to digital marketing. OR
2. A role with any of the top publishers where I am able to add some statistical value in their advertising business. OR
3. Transitioning into a CEO role of a mid-size player or start up where digital marketing is the core of their operations. Based on where I am in my career today, anything else wouldn't make sense.

Excerpts of a conversation with Kartik Isvarmurti, Managing Editor.

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