

## **SANDEEP VERMA'S VIEWS ON PR & THE WEB - NEW STRATEGIES FOR COMMUNICATIONS -**

The reason HLL launched Sunsilk Gang of Girls was that as a brand it was important to reconnect with the changing young Indian women. There was a need to build an enduring relationship with her.

The site was launched after conducting a year long consumer research out of which eight months were dedicated to direct consumer research and the balance four were dedicated to beta testing the site.

*Exponential  
change...  
necessary to  
embrace it..*

The research findings showed that in terms of our social environment, we are standing on shifting sands and change is rampant. For instance, four years ago, no one would have believed the prediction that in the year 2005 India would have more cell phones than landline connections.

The research made us realise that the future belongs to those who envision it and embrace change as it happens.

The research revealed some interesting facts about our target audience of young women. Her shopping styles and behavioural patterns showed that she is completely spoiled for choice. Dwelling in an era of consumer promiscuity it was certain that there is absolutely no brand loyalty in personal care products. The fact is that in India, each woman goes through six shampoo brands in a year!

She has a completely changing notion of value, where at one instance you can see her rushing off to Big Bazaar for a sale and at the other, buying a high luxury brand handbag. It is very difficult to understand what is going on in her life and what drives her behaviour at this point of time.

In the current scenario the question of gaining consumer loyalty loomed large.

We pondered on how to build a deep and long lasting relationship with our consumers and asked ourselves three questions - with whom to build; how many to build with; and what will it take from our side?

The answers to these questions were as follows:

- With whom? - With those that matter
- How many? - A few that matter
- What will take from our side? - Nothing but constant engagement

There were three questions posed by the women to us

- "Do u really understand me?"  
→ My needs...

- "Do u really care for me?"  
→ My Likes & dislikes...
- "Do u really value me?"  
→ My Dreams...

We realised that to address her needs, she seeks expertise on a lot of matters that confront her in her daily life. As far as she was concerned, the brand needed to be the source of expertise. For her likes and dislikes to be addressed, the brand had to give her things that she found fun and liked doing; and for her dreams to be achieved, the brand had to give her a platform for recognition.

Gang of Girls was built around three key platforms of

- **Expertise** on Inner and outer beauty, and on career advice
- **Fun** through interactive tools for the same and also a networking opportunity to share experiences with other women
- **Recognition** for her latent talent

Once these areas were identified the next step was to put a course of action in place to give her all the above. The first obvious medium was television / mass media. However, in the last few years there has been an explosion of television channels and the result today is therefore, to see every thing and remember nothing. We realised that we needed to use alternative media to better connect with our audience.

Once again, research showed us that Internet, wireless and music were the three key mediums to communicate with the youth. We chose Internet as the best medium to engage with her.

We provided interactive tools like a makeover machine, a programme that can change appearances and help choose hairstyles, hair colour, make up, cosmetics, skin tone and more. It is a tool that women can use themselves and in the process have fun too.

Research also showed that girls connect through commonality and hence love to share. They enjoy the process of communication as much as the end results itself.

If one were to ask why we chose blogs for her, the answer would be because blogs are an honest medium where she can write at leisure without the thought of pleasing another. In fact when the thought of creating a platform for sharing views was considered, a chat server was top of the mind. However, the problem with the chat server was that once she got on to chatting she would end up pleasing some one. Another reason for choosing blogs was that it is currently the cutting edge of networking and would afford her a pride of being a "blogger".

*Honest  
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networking...*

The reason why blogs have worked for us is because it is a medium of constant engagement and a step in the direction of the marketing holy

grail – “greater consumer loyalty”.

Bloggers are discerning consumers and they are the people who change the views of a society. They will be the opinion leaders of the society from here onwards as they are at the cutting edge of networking and talking about everything under the sun. These are the people who matter to us.

Another interesting fact we noted there are very few bloggers but there are tons of people commenting about their speak. They have the power to start and shape conversations.

The response to the site since its launch in June has been very encouraging. It has got almost 20 million hits in a month, in fact the site crashed in just about eight days after its launch due to heavy traffic. Currently there are one lakh registered community members and about 500 bloggers. Most of these bloggers are first timers and on an average each blog gets around 18 comments.

Our learnings so far include:

Her language – a mixture of Hinglish, SMS’s but on the whole a completely different language. The language itself is changing.

Her issues – 90 per cent of the blogs on the site were about relationships with various people who matter to her. And what’s more interesting were the solutions proposed. In fact, this has helped us understand exactly what’s going on inside her mind, what she likes and dislikes.

The greatest understanding from the Gang of Girls was that she writes on every thing - fears, happiness, sorrow, and more.

## **QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

*What age groups is Gang of Girls targeting?* Sandeep said that the site is mainly focused on the age group of 16 to 23 years, though most bloggers would fall in the age group of 20 to 25 years.

*How do you handle negative postings on the brand?* Sandeep answered that negative postings are taken more as feedback and helps build an enduring relationship with the consumer.

*Are negative feedbacks referred to corporate communications?* Sandeep replied that as a policy, all feedback, even negative, is handled at the brand level itself, as they know their brand best. Only if the blog is about the company, corporate communication is asked to intervene.

*How will you sustain the site without advertising?* Sandeep said that a three-phase campaign is being rolled out, where the first phase would focus on building awareness about the platform.

The second phase will include mass media to create awareness and on the ground activities at colleges, coffee shops, malls etc., to get more

personal with her. The idea is to engage with the target audience at multiple touch points. Once all these happen there will be enough word of mouth to keep it sustaining.

*Can you share with us how companies handle negative feedback posted on Mouthshut?*

Faisal shared the example of bazee.com, which had aggressively advertised itself and as a result got very high traffic. Apart from the site crashing at regular intervals, products would not be available, systems would not work, and transactions could not take place. As a result, a lot of negative reviews were posted on Mouthshut. When Avneesh Bajaj, the co-founder of Bazee.com asked Mouthshut to remove the negative feedbacks, it was explained to him that it was not possible to remove reviews as they were opinions of customers and that it was a matter of establishing credibility and trust with the end users. Bazee.com sent a delegation of its communications team to Mouthshut to talk about the same and they were again advised that it would be better for them to address the issues raised by users. As a result, Avneesh Bajaj registered as a member of Mouthshut.com and wrote a very passionate review titled "From the founders of Bazee.com". He presented the facts and within 24 hours there were at least 5000 people who had read the posting and word spread that Bazee.com cares. Post which, Bazee.com corrected a lot of things basis the feedback on Mouthshut.

Citing an example of a poorly managed feedback issue, Faisal shared how IIPM (Indian Institute of Planning and Management), served a legal notice to Mouthshut to remove a few negative reviews. Mouthshut refused to do so and advised them that the reviews were honest feedback and could not be removed and the fact that Mouthshut was just the facilitator. IIPM continued to press on their case and harassed Mouthshut and some of its users for almost three months. This act of IIPM earned them a great amount of ill will amongst the bloggers.

*Unlike newspapers that stand by their word, identities of bloggers are often unknown. Reputations are shred on the blogs and we are not aware of who does them. Are blogs in danger of becoming trivia?*

Faisal said that blogs would not become trivia because real people write them, give real opinions and provide real answers. The danger may lie in the fact that there are too many people out there doing it for fun.

He quoted the example of a blog called mediah.blogspot.com, which has even senior members of the media like Radhika Roy, Prannoy Roy, Vineet Jain and Rajdeep Sardesai hooked on. The blog gives real time information on each and every issue pertaining to media. Even information on hiring and firing is posted. This shows that nothing is private now and we need to recognise the power of people as ultimately that is what translates to the power of democracy.

Sandeep added an example on the power of Blogs. He said, on Gang of Girls, there is a feature called "Shout Box" where people generally leave a lot of messages for each other. Following the recent Mumbai blasts, a few people had left anti-Pakistan messages. That very day, a group of girls from Pakistan posted a blog to oppose the comments on Pakistan. They complained against allowing such

comments to be posted on Gang of Girls and asking for a process to filter out blogs such as these. Initially, Sunsilk ignored this review, however, by the end of the day the blog had over one-lakh visitors and 75 comments! All bloggers were Indian supporting the Pakistan blog and the next day some media queries were raised. Ultimately, the "Shout Box" had to be taken off the site.

(Excerpted from the presentation made by Sandeep Verma, Senior Brand Manager, (Sunsilk) Unilever, at PR Pundit's workshop, held in Bangalore on July 20, 2006)