

A NEW DIMENSION



He is one of the foremost personalities of Sri Lanka's advertising industry. Modest and unassuming, his strength has lain in his ability to build value and create strong and lasting relationships. Stanley Carvalho speaks to Business Today about the key to successful advertising and the launching of his new company, Orion Consultants.

By Ayesha Inoon

Tell us about your career. How did you enter the advertising industry?

My professional career started in pharmaceuticals. After completing my education in India, with a Bachelor's Degree in Commerce, I joined Pfizer Pharmaceuticals, a Fortune 500 company, as a management trainee. I was there in the marketing division for seven years. I then won a scholarship to attend the Business School of the University of Massachusetts. After completing the MBA programme, I joined

American Hoechst, a pharmaceutical company in New Jersey. It was not only a great learning experience, but also a great working experience. I had the opportunity to work with top-end professionals, both in the medical and pharmaceutical specialties in and around New York. This was an impressionable experience.

It was when I returned to Sri Lanka that I got into advertising. I joined Grant McCann Erickson in Client Services and worked up to the position of Executive Director on the Board, and Head of Strategic Planning and Consumer Insights. This is what I've been doing for almost 30 years. I've worked with some of the top renowned clients in the market and on highly successful brands. My whole professional career has been enriched by interaction with these clients and those with whom I have interacted with in the McCann World Group Network – these have given a new dimension to my professional experience.

Another thing that I've been doing for a long time, at least for the last 15 years or so, is training, for which I've been trained by the McCann World Group. I'm also on the Faculty of the Synergy School of Marketing, lecturing in Advertising and Public Relations. I've been doing a series of lectures with the University of Moratuwa and with the Marketing Department of Sri Jayawardenapura University. I like this kind of interaction where I can interact with young minds that are keen to learn. I like to pass on my knowledge, and this has been a very rewarding experience.

Unlike others in the advertising industry, you have chosen to stay out of the limelight, although your name is well known. Will you elaborate?

Well, I have been a low-profile person. I am just made like that and I have no regrets. Having said that, I must add that I have been actively involved and held positions in both Marketing and Advertising, professional institutes and associations and also participated in advertising and marketing workshops, conferences and seminars here and abroad. People who know me know who I am, what I have done and what I can deliver. Over the years I have built valuable relationships with clients, with my co-workers and industry professionals, both locally and internationally. This is something I cherish and value.

What is your aim in starting this consultancy?

Brand and Brand Communication Strategy built on Consumer Insights should be an integral invaluable and indispensable ingredient in the total marketing communication process of building great brands. I am now convinced, even more, on the significance of Consumer Insights based Strategy in the building and sustaining of strong brands.

Advertising builds brands and brands build business. But there is lot more to effective advertising than creativity, or creativity for creativity's sake. Consumer Insights based strategy gives creativity a compelling focus. One needs to know and understand what is in the minds and hearts of the people one wants to reach. That is how one connects with one's consumers and engages them. One can do the best creatives in the world and create the most award winning advertising, but if it does not connect with and engage your consumer, it is so much clever copy and pretty pictures.

Strategic Planning is comparatively the more recent of all the disciplines in the ad industry. In fact there are many ad agencies that yet do not have clearly defined and functioning strategic planning and consumer insight disciplines. Here I must stress on strategy that is insightful and not strategy that sounds clever and is more sizzle than substance.

You have a consumer out there, who is intelligent and choice-empowered, a market place that is intensively competitive, further compounded by the economic downturn and diminishing levels of consumer confidence. If you factor in all these elements, you realise the need for brand and brand communication strategy based on Consumer Insights to develop creativity that connects with the consumer, works in the market place and ensures a healthy Return on Investment (ROI). That is the challenge that every brand must overcome, if it has to be a successful brand and that, is the value addition Orion Consultancy will bring to any brand building partnership it is involved in. That's the single minded aim of my consultancy.

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Would you say your consultancy is different?

What is special about my consultancy and what will differentiate it, is the single-minded focus on Consumer Insights based Strategy - both Brand and Brand Communication. Consumer Insights will be the crucial and compelling differentiator. I must clearly differentiate 'Insights' from 'Information'. Information is there for the mere asking and looking. What is obvious is never an insight. Insight requires the skill and the ability to sift through loads of information and facts, and pick the all important core. It is the ability to look into the hearts and minds of consumers, and discover the touch points that help brand communications connect meaningfully with the consumer. Insights detect the 'feelings' behind the facts. We may have a

lot of information – we say things happen in a certain way due to a given set of reasons. But we need to pause and question the obvious. It is only then we get a completely new perspective, a new dimension into the lives of people – their hopes, their desires, their aspirations, their needs, their wants and values. It is these insightful values that need to be woven into the strategy that determines brand communications which the consumer can easily relate to. Great brands are built on such insightful strategies. That is how I differentiate the Orion offering. It is different and it will stay different.

What is your opinion on the advertising industry in Sri Lanka? Have you seen many changes in the industry during the course of your career?

I have been witness to many a change in the industry. To begin with, the industry has grown not only in numbers but also in variety. It is now a broad-spectrum discipline with an array of players of all sizes, catering to every conceivable need right across the portfolio of users, equipped to meet almost every marketing need. The ad industry has stood up to and successfully met up with a variety of challenges. The changing adscape both locally and globally, whether one looks at the evolving new consumer, the new media and market challenges and the other elements of the communication mix, has impacted the ad industry for the better. It has grown and shown an uncommon level of maturity. It has survived the lean and depressed periods and has got what it takes to ride over whatever the future may hold. It has that kind of resiliency.

But, the industry as a whole, I believe, is short on one vital element – knowledge. I am convinced beyond question that the industry can do with a stronger knowledge base. This is an imperative and indispensable requirement, considering the nature of the business we are in – connecting with people. It was many decades ago that the legendary Sir Winston Churchill said “The kingdoms of the future are the kingdoms of the mind”. That kingdom has long arrived and the discipline of advertising is in the thick of it. There is no denying that.

Having said that I must categorically add that the industry has in its rank, many seniors who are exemplary exponents of this knowledge base that I am talking about. They are experienced, knowledgeable, talented and innovative and above all, still learning and sharing their knowledge with those who care enough to learn. I have the honour of knowing them and sharing my working experiences with them. As such, I can vouch for it. However, that is the exception. I cannot generalise and say that of the entire industry. So, my take on the industry is, that it must build a much stronger knowledge base. That is the added dimension the industry urgently needs, not only to keep pace but to stay ahead of the changes. Human capital is

what drives and sustains the advertising industry and as with all capital, it must be nurtured to grow and appreciate. Knowledge is not an option.

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In the current economic downturn, with companies tending to advertise less, how will you tackle the market?

It's in a downturn that companies will have a lot more need for Consumer Insights based Brand Communication Strategies, which ensure the development of effective advertising. Advertising that works in the market place, engages the consumer and brings about a sale.

You have invested time, effort, skills and money to build your brand and secure a preferred place in the mind of the consumer, so irrespective of whether it is a downturn or an up-turn, it does not make marketing sense to abandon your brand when it most needs communication support to stay in the consumer's consideration set. It is important that you maintain appropriate levels of visibility to sustain brand preference. The finely tuned strategies to meet with such contingency will require insights based on the constant monitoring of social, cultural and economic undercurrents which help us to best understand the forces that affect and influence consumers and determine their choice of products and services and also how they react and respond to marketing communications.

I understand the pressure on marketers to rationalise and be more accountable in times of recession, to secure an acceptable ROI on marketing expenses. It is in this demanding context that marketers need to rely on best practices in communications planning, to sustain the brand equity that has been built and Brand Communication Strategy based on Consumer Insights is undoubtedly among the best business practices that any marketer can deploy in such challenging times.

Most marketers will acknowledge what I am saying and also, that strategies built on Consumer Insights are an indispensable value addition.

How will your consultancy fit into the Sri Lankan market? Many local companies are yet to focus on strategy.

Well, the answer to that is a 'yes' and also a 'no'. It is true to a great extent but I would certainly not generalise. There are quite a few local clients I have dealt with

during my career who have been initiated into brand communication strategies and now are staunch believers in the value that such strategies add to building successful brands.

Whether global or local, all companies are into building and sustaining strong and acceptable brands. It's a fact that the emerging Sri Lankan market and consumer are changing with the evolving global trends and becoming more competitive, challenging and sophisticated. To build, sustain and increase market share profitably requires a holistic approach to understanding and communicating with your consumer. It's what consumers 'feel' not necessarily what they say and 'think' about your brand, that determines their actions, choices and, therefore, your brand's future. It is this 'feel' that builds the emotional bonding between consumer and brand and it is this bonding that results in brand loyalty.

This holistic approach cannot happen automatically. Brand and brand communication strategies based on insights, which are consumer centric needs, must be a part of this holistic plan. Not that local clients don't focus on strategy. They do. They are familiar with the marketing strategies they develop, but clients need to factor in the consumer-centric, brand and brand communication strategies that their communication partners must develop and present. It is only then the client is equipped with the holistic approach to building great brands. As such, the ad agencies have a crucial and compelling role to play in helping companies in their brand building efforts. Hence, there is a need. There is a void that is waiting to be productively filled. So what is required is the knowledge and the skill to provide the much needed value-addition. This is what my consultancy will provide to make a difference.

