

“WE NEED” AND NOT “WE WANT” THE NAME BEHIND THE BIG ADS CELEBRATES THEIR FOURTH YEAR



“You might not have heard of us, but you have most definitely seen our work” they say. The familiar Lanka Bell Kottu commercial which promotes Lanka Bell’s payments for incoming IDD calls and the Caltex commercial where Kandyan dancers and musicians perform Gajaga Wannama atop a number of vehicles and the most recent Hutch tic tic advertisements have all been their brainchild. Chrishantha Jayasinghe, the Managing Director of Sarva Integrated along with Creative Directors Paul Blacker and S Kalaichelvan sat down with Business Today to talk about Sarva’s journey in advertising that recently stepped into its fourth year.

By Thilini Kahandawaarachchi | Photography by Menaka Aravinda

Recently, Sarva Integrated celebrated its fourth year in advertising. Could you tell us about your journey through these years?

We started in 2005, on 5th of May with just five people. I had been working with established agencies earlier and I suddenly found myself without a job. Then Dilith and Varunit who were my friends at Triad said “look, why don’t you start your own thing? We will give you the support.” So we started with five people, full of anxiety. But amazingly it was not as bad as or as negative as we expected it to be.

I remember going to my first meeting. It was a client I used to work with before and when I had moved out of my previous agency they had gone to another agency, so they were very happy to see me and they gave us business. DIMO gave us a small project and we grew to more projects and today we are their lead agency.

In the same way, one of the biggest things that happened to us along our road was Lanka Bell. Within three months of our starting, we got an invitation to pitch for Lanka Bell and that was the turning point for us. We feel that our “karadaraless” campaign turned things around for Lanka Bell. The first campaign we did for them was a huge hit. So everyone wanted to know the agency that was doing Lanka Bell work and that gave us inroads to many other clients. So, with Lanka Bell we also got work from Caltex and DIMO and those were our three main clients and we had some work coming from Reckitt Benckiser etc. Then subsequently Paul joined and Kalai came in and our Creative Department grew and along with that growth, we got more business coming in. More importantly, most of the work we did brought in hardcore bottom line results for our clients. That in turn helped us to get more revenue and also helped us to get more business. So looking back, to be very honest, I still can’t believe that I am heading an organisation like this today. I suppose the key for us was Lanka Bell because without Lanka Bell we would not be where we are today. It would have been a different journey.

I Strongly Believe That Ultimately An Agency Is Not The Name Board, The Plush Offices, Or The Cameras And Such Equipment. It Is The People; The Human Talent And Human Assets You Have.

What sets you apart in advertising in Sri Lanka?

Very boldly, it is effectiveness. If you look at Sri Lanka, we don’t have any structured training in place. Generally ad agencies have artists and writers.

However, more often than not artists and writers do not understand business. Firstly, they cannot understand the client's business objectives, secondly they cannot understand the communication objective. Therefore, those who meet the client and extract information from the client have to sit with the artists and writers and talk to them in a manner and a language that they can understand and get a solution out of them.

You might not know this, but not many people know how to talk to a creative team in a manner that they can understand. I spent the first eight years of my career sitting down with clients and trying to understand their communication problems. The next nine years were spent actually doing creative. So I've had my feet firmly planted on both sides of the fence. Therefore, I can sit with a client and figure out what they 'need' to communicate and not what they 'want' to communicate since most of the time the client does not know what should be communicated; he only knows the problem. Then, I sit with the creative team and discuss with them what has to be done; I talk to them in a language that they understand and extract a solution that will work for the client and at the same time be creatively different enough to stand out in the clutter while sending a message that can be easily understood by the audience.

Nine times out of ten our work has proven effective. The best example I can give is the Osram Korale Mahattaya campaign. When we started working with this client, he could not go and sell a light bulb into a store because they would say, "What is Osram? We don't know". Then we sat down with the client and decided that we should talk to people who were buying cheap CFL bulbs. That was the communication strategy. Secondly, Osram is one of the most expensive bulbs. When it is a German brand who would use a Korale Mahattaya in the communication? You would try and make it posh and sophisticated with fancy words such as 'German technology' etc. We decided to do it our way and came up with the concept of a Korale Mahattaya. If you look at the entire concept behind the advertisement, it revolved around the marketing problem and the solution. Again, I say, thank goodness because creativity is like medical diagnosis, you could be wrong, you could be right and in this particular case, it worked. In fact today the problem is, Germany cannot supply enough bulbs. They are out of stock most of the time and sadly for us that means they don't advertise as much as they should.

You mentioned that Lanka Bell is one of your major clients, looking at the advertisements that you have done, it shows that you do work for some big names. Can you tell us about your client portfolio?

Originally our main clients were Lanka Bell, Caltex and DIMO; we are renowned for

the work we do for these three. However during the past few months we had a lot of new business coming in as they wanted a creative product that would provide return on investment. We also do work for ODEL though we are not their lead agency, as well as Sri Lanka Insurance Corporation, CIMA, Pan Asia Bank, Kotmale, Hero Honda, Phoenix Plastics and Hutch, our latest client.

Would you like to talk about some of the ad campaigns Sarva has worked on?

Yes, my favourite is the Caltex Gajaga Wannama advertisement. All the people are actual musicians and not dummy actors. So we had to find people who could actually play cellos and aboriginal flutes etc. We needed fifty vehicles and fifty artists and that was about hundred odd people. There was another fifty crew, so we had about hundred and fifty people. We needed three days of clear weather before we could shoot and every time we tried to shoot, it rained. Every time we had to cancel a shoot, we had to call 150 people and reorganise it. Most of Sri Lanka's musicians were there such as Derick Wickramanayake, Elephant Foot, some of Ravibandhu's dancers etc.

Sarva has worked on a number of big advertising campaigns such as the Lanka Bell Kottu ad and also the Caltex Gajaga Wannama ad. Would you like to talk about the Creative Team behind these advertisements?

Everyone is trying to hunt for talent; talented advertising professionals are stolen all the time. We at Sarva have been very lucky because we have been able to attract and retain some great talent. Our Creative Team has huge bandwidth as most of them perform more than one function. We also have a big group of "heavy weight creative big guns" as I call them. Though we are relatively young as an advertising agency, most of these guys are very well experienced and very well talented. I am absolutely proud of the team.

I am not a one hundred percent creative person, I am partly creative and I can't do work for all the clients. It is their talent; the talent of the creative team. I am like the driver of this machine and they are the engine; if not for them we would not be where we are. The creative department has four teams headed by the creative heads. Altogether we have a full time creative staff of twenty three people, which is a very large number. They are the engine and without them I am just a figure head. I strongly believe that ultimately an agency is not the name board, the plush offices, or the cameras and such equipment. It is the people; the human talent and human assets you have. At Sarva, we have some of the best assets in the advertising business.

Since we have a very high ratio of Creative Team members to account management, our Creative Team has quite an advantage as they can spend more quality time on a project. Age is another factor that makes us unique because there are members as young as just twenty and the oldest is around sixty years. Coupled with the diverse languages we speak, it creates an environment where we can relate to any client or any target audience.

Another factor that is unique about the Sarva Creative Team is that we believe that in Sri Lanka, there is no one who thinks foreign other than foreigners. For example, if you go to a Royal-Thomian, you will see some of the top corporate officers singing baila. We might be posh but ultimately we are not foreigners, we think Sri Lankan, we eat Sri Lankan and we act Sri Lankan. Foreign creative personnel do not understand the local culture. For example, what appeals in another country, need not necessarily work here. Of course, sometimes it does, but a majority of times it does not. So, one unique feature of our creative team is that everyone is very well rooted in Sri Lanka as well as Sri Lankan culture and tradition whether they are conceptualising in English, Sinhala or Tamil.

Paul Blacker works exclusively in English, but he is rooted in local culture. With his education up to Ordinary Level in Sinhala, his thinking remains local and that is the advantage that he has. Kalai heads a unit called Triad Mantram that functions and thinks in Tamil. Most of the time people think in English and translate it into Tamil; no one actually thinks and strategises in Tamil. However, with Kalai and his enormous amount of experience, we have set up a division around him that concentrates on Tamil communication through Tamil cultural understanding. That gives us an edge.

In a short span of four years, Sarva has come a long way. What have been the achievements?

I consider that our achievements are the achievements of our clients; how they have grown and how their profits have grown. Advertising today is a highly competitive field. So, our achievement is our client list, the work we have done for them and the results it has generated for them. For all our clients our work has been work that works. Of course, we have won awards, but that is not our *raison d'être*, it is only the icing on the cake. But once more I would like to reiterate that our main achievement is our clients.

Photo Captions – 1. L-R: Madhusha Menmendaarachchi, Graham Roberts, Nishantha Shanthadeva, Paul Blacker, Prageeth Prasanjaya, S Kalaichelvan, Sumith Akmeemana, Krishan Jayaratnam and Mahinda Jeevananda. 2.(L-R: Chrishantha

JAyasinghe, Paul Blacker and S Kalaichelvan)

