

Brand Leadership

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Breathing new life to local brands, bringing a fresh face to products and changing the way consumers think have been prevalent throughout his career spanning 30 years. Some of the popular brand names in the local markets today that have even become household names, can be attributed to Nandana Wickramage, Group Director/Head of Marketing and Sales, Ceylon Biscuits Limited, who was recently recognised for his work on the global platform.

By Prasadini Nanayakkara

Awarded the Brand Leadership Award at the 19th Global Awards for Brand Excellence, represented by 112 countries, this global accolade by the World Brand Congress marks the pinnacle of Nandana Wickramage's career dedicated to building and elevating brands. His success is through an experience garnered from understanding the consumers from the grass root level.

The World Brand Congress is governed by an Advisory Council that guides the strategic intent of the event towards its success. The World Brand Congress is strategically partnered by CMO Council USA and CMO Asia and is a non-profit making activity. The theme for this years Congress was "Building Borderless Brands: Rethinking Innovation."

Dave Porter, the Global Chairman, World Brand Congress, shared his views on Wickramage's Brand Leadership Award stating that it is the most prestigious award an individual can receive at the World Brand Congress. This view was mirrored by Dr Rajul L Bhatia, Project Director, World Brand Congress as well, who further elaborated that it is presented to an individual who has played a pivotal role in shaping and building brands. Under the individual's able stewardship, these brands are then nurtured to an iconic status. Nandana Wickramage, he added is one such individual whose efforts need to be recognised.

From his school days at Trinity College Kandy it was his dream to excel in sports and bring honour to the country. Having reached the national level in both Boxing and Athletics, his dream however was waylaid by a head injury. Yet his vision remained unchanged, although not in the field of sports. "I was stranded, I was not qualified to go to university for higher studies and I had to find a career but the right one that I could excel in. Thus I began as a trainee sales representative with my basic A Level qualification," says Nandana Wickramage of his humble beginnings in the world of sales and marketing. Undeterred by the many hardships he persevered from strength to strength while building his understanding and aptitude in the field. From a trainee at Hideki Group, followed by short stints at Hitachi and Dimo he ventured to Fast Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG). He began as the first and only retail sales representative for John Keells' new venture in processed meat products. "A sales representative covering the entire country was no mean task and since the leading processed meat products brands of that time, Elephant House and Goldi, had been limited to the main cities, I had to venture out, educate the consumer, and traders on the concept of

pre cooked processed meats which were novel to the country,” says Wickramage of his early experiences. This opened new avenues and soon he was recruiting representatives and training them himself.

“I managed to develop a fleet of sales people and I further realised that the brand name at the time, Atlas, was not right for processed meat products,” he says. His keen sense of what attracts consumers led to transforming this brand to Keells, what it is popularly known to this day.

While accumulating experience handling, selling, promotions and branding he proceeded to educate himself to understand the concept of Marketing. Stints at Aminos International handling his first multinational brand Meadowlea, which became a market leader, and then at Maharaja Organisation transforming the loss-making brand S-lon to become a market leader position with 65% market share within three years, marked the beginnings of many successes to come. From strategic marketing concepts, he went on to do TV commercials, writing scripts, hiring cameras and even shooting commercials gaining a multifaceted experience involving the S-lon brand. “We had to educate the consumer to look for the brand as the consumers were misled by the traders due to higher profit margins offered by the low quality manufacturers,” he says of a large-scale strategy that even involved introducing plumber training programmes.

His transforming touch with brands continued with successful brand launches including Pepsi “Mega” at Maharajah and finding niche markets with Cargill’s Sam kid sausages. While at Cargills he was instrumental in bringing the masses to supermarkets, which were at the time limited to certain segments. “At the time FM radio was very popular and we brought radio stations into the super markets to operate outdoor broadcast from the outlet,” he says. The popularity of the FM crew attracted the masses into the outlets where the consumer discovered that super markets were a better and convenient place to shop and the prices were not beyond their reach.



Joining CBL in the year 2000 to date, he continued making an impact with brands. Biscuits (Munchee), which were below 30% market share reached market leader position with over 60% market share and chocolates (Ritzbury) escalated from eight percent market share to market leader with 48% market share. Lanka Soy, Samaposha and Tiara were the other brands that were driven to market leader positions in their respective categories. “To take

up brands to market leadership in the last ten years at CBL has been my career success," he says adding that, "what I was able to bring into the company was basically down to earth Marketing thinking and team spirit. We look at brands from a consumers' point of view... building a brand is not a gimmick. If you have a good product or service, it is how you register your brand name in the minds of the consumer and endue them."

This success is further reflected with CBL's Munchee and Ritzbury winning awards as well, as the only two FMCG brands to receive awards at the World Brand Congress. "I was able to bring some glory to the country and my company by winning an international award," says Wickramage reflecting on his childhood dream.

Furthermore Nandana Wickramage has conceptualised, scripted and directed the mass media communication campaigns of some of the brands under his purview. His creativity reaches far beyond the confines of marketing as an accomplished lyricist, having written over 200 songs which have gained much popularity.

In the field of marketing, where no two consumers are alike, with mindsets changing frequently with time and location, success in marketing requires learning and understanding the consumer every minute. "The key factor is understanding. Understanding the consumer, the people around you, your product. 'Marketing is understanding' and I would tell anyone entering this field to start right at the bottom whatever the qualifications one may have - a firm foundation to understanding can only be laid at the bottom," he stresses.

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