

DIGITAL-THE FUTURE IS HAPPENING NOW

Posted on

Digital is almost a buzz word in Sri Lanka, with many speaking about 'going digital' and 'digital marketing' without much knowledge of the subject. Digital tools are used in communication strategies in an ad hoc manner, which ultimately does not bring value to the campaign or the brand. Digital marketing is essential in the present day, where social media and other online tools are used to draw people. Digital media has to be used responsibly and with clear understanding. Wijitha Wijesekera has been in the advertising industry for 30 years and has global exposure, having worked with many international agencies and brands. His forte is digital marketing and communications, developing strategies that look at the 'bigger picture.' Presently on a special assignment with BT Options in Sri Lanka, he speaks about the importance of doing things right and working with the right people to ensure that the right message is communicated to deliver successful results.

By Udeshi Amarasinghe. Assisted by Gayathri Kothalawala Photography Mahesh Bandara and Menaka Aravinda



You have been in the advertising industry for 30 years, with both international and Sri Lankan experience. Can you tell us about your background and journey?

It was 1989. Universities in the country were closed at the time due to the second insurgency and though I studied mathematics, out of boredom I followed my passion in arts and advertising and landed my very first job at Explore Sri Lanka

magazine. It was a wonderful opportunity: working on an Apple Macintosh – in Colombo – was unheard of at the time!

After a few years and a couple of short stints later, I joined Ogilvy Dubai in 1994. By the time I reached 30, I had risen to be the Head of Creative; being responsible for the creative output for North Africa, Middle East and Turkey (NAMET) for Unilever and Gillette brands amongst others. I was fortunate to learn advertising from the industry giants such as Richard Bullmore and other masters at Ogilvy; and put the craft to practice with FMCG giants like Unilever, British American Tobacco, SmithKline Beecham, Reckitts and Kraft. That experience was priceless and it was the best University education in advertising, one could ever wish for!

I returned to Sri Lanka in 2005 and rejoined BT Options as the Strategic Planning and Creative Director. A few years later I migrated to Australia. While I was in Australia, I was headhunted by Dentsu for a position in Saudi Arabia and was appointed as Creative Director for Dentsu Jeddah. I held that position till 2013 and was possibly the only non-Arabic Speaking Creative Director to survive Saudi Arabia for five years.

Following the completion of my tenure in Saudi Arabia, I moved to Dubai and was the Regional Creative Director for Blink Experience, which is an innovative communications agency. They work with Red Bull, MasterCard, Ford, Toyota, Porsche, VW, Lilly and many other international brands – specializing in new types of communication and engagement strategies. Having worked for two years with them and executing a regional role was extremely tiring because I was responsible for Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Riyadh, Jeddah, Doha, and many markets in the region, and I was always traveling.

I left that extremely demanding routine four years ago, to start my own marketing consultancy in Dubai, which is where I am now, and currently I am in Sri Lanka on a special assignment.

The Best Thing To Be Is In Digital. I Would Say, Go With The Flow And Just Keeping One Step Ahead Of The Rest. Digital Is Today And Tomorrow. That Is Why I Am In Digital.

How did you end-up in Digital?

For me to find myself in digital is nothing surprising – it was part of my natural progression. I started old-school-style, with design and art direction and progressed to mastering the art of communication with an advertising giant like Ogilvy. By the year 2000, the industry was changing and I too moved to brand activation and experiential marketing, which was ‘the thing.’ From there, to events and innovative communications – and now, the best thing to be is in digital. I would say, go with the flow and just keeping one step ahead of the rest. Digital is today and tomorrow. That is why I am in digital.

Everyone talks about digital marketing, but no one really seems to understand it. How would you describe digital?

Digital marketing is actually nothing different from everything else. It is about how you would take your brand, service, or the product to the people. The only thing it uses is a different channel: we are using online media as mainstream communication in digital marketing.

The advantage of digital is brand-intimacy. In traditional communication, when you are running press ads, radio commercials, or outdoor campaigns, your consumer was never closer to you. There was a massive gap, whereas, with digital, you are literally in your consumer’s bedroom, at a hand’s distance. This intimacy is the advantage that digital marketing offers any of the brands, products, or services.

In Sri Lanka, people think that social media is digital. That is a wrong perception, digital is more than social media. If you take LinkedIn, that is also digital. Brands and companies promote themselves by publishing brand-stories on LinkedIn, and that gives them credibility. Social media is only a fraction of digital.

The challenge with digital is defining where marketing ends and where invasion (of privacy) begins. Gathering personal data, building consumer profiles, tracking consumer habits and mapping behavior, as well as data mining are where things become blurry for all of us. There are no defined borders – or even laws in some cases. With Big Data and Internet of Things (IoT) at play, what a brand can do with consumer data is only limited to one’s imagination.

What is the scope and opportunities for digital in Sri Lanka?

Sri Lanka has massive opportunities in the digital front because right now from what I feel and what I see, we are only scratching the surface. That is also done

somewhat recklessly and in a clueless manner. We must remember that communication fundamentals and human behavior remain unchanged, whether the medium is digital or not.

In digital marketing too, you have to start with a communication strategy. It has to be hand-in-hand with the marketing and sales strategy of the brand. If you forget that, you are going to fail. When I see most of the digital work that is being done here, the most significant flaw is that the digital plan is not part of the overall communication strategy. It feels disconnected from the rest of the campaign, right?

On one hand, there is that disconnection. On the other hand, you see a press ad on a digital medium, which is also wrong. You need to understand the dynamics of each medium or channel and then only you will be able to harness the real strength and power of digital tools.

If I were to elaborate on what I am saying, think of the way you would read a newspaper. You have a different mindset, you are relaxed, but your brain is highly stimulated with current affairs and the way with the world. An analytical headline or a thought-provoking ad would easily be understood. But when you are traveling in a vehicle with the wind in your hair, you see hoardings on the street – that flashes by in two to three seconds. You would miss the point if the hoarding carries an analytical headline.

Similarly, when you have a device in your hand, with all the time in the day to go through its content, your mood, behavior and approach would be different. We have to understand this fundamental human behavior first. Then take the same message or brand story, and adapt it to the time and place they will look at the content and absorb that information. This habit of developing content to suit the medium is rarely happening in Sri Lanka.

If you take an average, digitally-connected person, they could be in one of the three distinctly different mindsets. They could be on the go, leaning forward, or leaning back.

On the go is when you are on the move, flipping through Twitter, Instagram and some Facebook content. You don't have much time; you scan through your feed. Brands must develop 'instant content' for people on the go, so the content or the story we create has to be immediate.

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When you are leaning forward, probably you are in a waiting room, let's say at a doctor's appointment. You have a little bit more time. Perhaps, you might spend a minute or two on the feed that is coming on your social stream. For these people, we need to have informative, interactive content developed. Leaning back is when you are at home, before bedtime, or maybe after a meal. With this mind-set, you are ready to spend a lot more time to understand, read, and learn new things or just entertain yourself. For them, we need to produce immersive content. Typically, YouTube-like content, which can be ten to 15 minutes to feature length.

If you understand digital media, you would develop content for these three situations, very wisely. Your content could be cross-platform – a three-minute video could be on Facebook, Whatsapp and YouTube, serving a couple of situations above. But, you wouldn't post a YouTube video directly on Facebook. A typical YouTube video is immersive; that should be for the person leaning back somewhere, ready for that content.

When creating immediate, interactive or immersive content, we could use the same story or same material – edit it for a minute or even ten seconds, and then post on different, appropriate channels such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and Twitter, supported with backlinks and hashtags, so the story grows. Understanding the human behavior and how our brain works and how each social media channel works is essential in digital marketing. Sri Lankan brands and advertising agencies have to master that art to start with.

We have to understand how the human brain has become faster after the iPhone was introduced. According to an MIT Study, we can process a thought in 30 milliseconds today, compared to 300 milliseconds in 2004. If assisted by an image, we could process a thought or form an opinion within 13 milliseconds. Which means, we can decide to like, hate or have an emotion with what we see that quickly.

We are also capable of reading up to 500 words per minute on a smart phone,

thanks to fixed- point, super focused displays. Human brain is super fast and capable of processing one terabyte of data, every second, even if the brain functions at one percent of it's full potential. What it means is that people are going to look at your feed on their phone and instantly decide whether they are going to read your brand story or not.

This is why it is critical to make sure your brand story is appealing to the consumer and it is delivered at the right time, at the right speed, on the right channel. How do we do that? It is only by identifying and understanding how each social media platform works.

Sri Lankan content generators have not cracked this properly yet. Looking at digital media analytics, we can notice that there are actually very different, or unusual, results coming from Sri Lanka. For example, there is a considerable number of people who visit YouTube, but spend very little time. In Sri Lanka, some have no idea how on how each digital channel performs and how best it could be used.

Generation Gap and Digital - how are these connected?

To understand Digital, one needs to understand the significant differences between the generations born into different technological eras.

The oldest generation you see in the corporate world are the ones you call the Baby Boomers. They were born before 1960 or early part of the 60s. Then came the Generation X. They actually witnessed how everything turned from manual to digital. They remember the rotary phones, how they had to dial the exchange and wait for half an hour to get a long-distance call.

Today, you can call anyone, anywhere in the world with just one-speed dial. Those who were born between 1980s to mid 90's are the Millennials. They were born into technology. They have never seen the world without a TV, without a mobile phone or without technology around the house.

And, now we have the ones who are born after the Millennials - Generation Z. These people are born into such a fast environment, their brains, and their thinking work in a very different way. For them, their aspirations are different. For example, because they were born into an age where Uber was part of their life, they'd rather share a car than own one. Rideshare is inherent to them. They are ready to share anything and everything; so they are not racists. That is a good thing. They are

willing to be plant-based eaters; they are against animal cruelty. You will see so many vegans, who are only teenagers. This new liberal, socialist, mentality is going to grow into a situation where this generation becomes majority voters. When they want to vote, they will not vote for parties that are promoting nationalism, or conservative ideologies – by default they would want a world with equal opportunities and fairness in ownership; even if it means sharing a country.

They will vote for more liberal ideologists. You can see this happening in the US. When they conducted a research with the Millennials and Generation Z, most of their attitudes and thinking were identified with one particular party. Not the other. This can happen to Sri Lanka as well. This generation is going to have a significant impact on political decisions one day, and as a result, the future of the country.

The danger is that we are losing the passion in this generation. They are not passionate about crafting things. They are not passionate about a career. Sure, they'd want to make money, but they cannot be bothered with writing reports, or waiting until their career matures. The problem is, when there is no passion, there is nothing to die for. When there is nothing to die for, there is nothing to live for either.

If HR personnel, recruiters, CEOs, politicians, and policymakers do not recognize this shift in their mindset today, we might find it too late to take corrective measures. Sharing and caring is a fantastic concept, but if they are not willing to work hard for it, if they all want it easy, then the company, or even the country is going to be faced with a major issue. When this easy-going generation enter the main workforce, into decision-making areas, what will happen to this world? The advantage of digital is we can already identify these trends; we can already see these changes.

We can already predict how things are going to go. If we take a look back at digital and how you master those tools, then the future is very moldable, and you can easily use it the way you want.

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Digital is not a medium solely for commercial use but is also essential for political campaigns, building a profile, and much more. Can you elaborate on this?

True, in the good old days, we used to consider politicians and personalities as brands. In that sense, there is not much of a difference because whether you are a coffee brand or a person, your fundamental values, and your DNA would remain the same. With digital marketing, instead of describing ingredients or the formula of a product, we tell stories. Each brand has a story. In the same manner, even a prominent person, a celebrity, or a politician, could all have a story, which brings them closer to the people.

The difference comes in, I believe, in the promise. Unlike traditional advertising, thanks to digital marketing and all the available information, a new consumer could read the reviews, see what other consumers have said about that product before making up their mind.

When it comes to personalities, let's say if you are selecting a president, you are not going to ask ten other people to tell you who is better. This is your own decision, you will make-up your own mind based on what you know, and heard of, the person. Therefore, in digital, you have to make sure that the personality connects with people one-on-one and builds affinity, becomes more closer than any brand. In order to do so, these personalities could use the advanced technology and vast amount of tools available today to learn a lot about the people whose hearts and minds they'd want to win. They can do data mining, deep learning, and they can apply many techniques to artificial intelligence to actually figure out what people would like to hear or say as well as analyze their thought patterns. Politicians and celebrities can actually customize what they want to say, and carve out a speech that would appeal to the desired target audience.

This has been done before, and that is why Cambridge Analytica created such a huge uproar. Even Donald Trump is under investigation because of the possible manipulation through available data. The use of digital eventually becomes an ethical question, especially in politics. How ethical it is to go behind someone, understand what that person likes, and then to create a personality that would, you know, appeal to them. Be it a businessman, be it a politician, or a celebrity, every country needs to have a set of ethics, rules, and regulations to curtail unwanted manipulation. This is of paramount importance because our personal data is out there for anyone to access.

In Digital, You Have To Make Sure That The Personality Connects With People One-On- One And Builds Affinity, Becomes More Closer Than Any Brand. In Order To Do So, These Personalities Could Use The Advanced Technology And Vast Amount Of Tools Available Today To Learn A Lot About The People Whose Hearts And Minds They'd Want To Win.

What are the pros and cons of using digital?

There are many pros, if we look at it from a purely advertising and marketing point of view. Let's say I have a bakery, and I want to introduce coffee-flavored buns. In the past, I would have had to actually bake those buns, test it out with a hundred people, get their feedback to see whether it's working better against the strawberry flavor. Today I can actually do a simple test on Instagram, and I can immediately see who prefers which flavor instead of spending a week, month or two years on research to introduce a new flavour. This is a considerable saving in terms of investment and resources. That is just one example, but much more can be done on digital instead of physically; where you can apply the available data and knowledge to decide what works better.

The digital medium is cheaper, with a better ROI. And digital is instant with real-time results. You can easily control, distribute, monitor, manipulate, optimize, promote, and boost your advertising and content in the digital world.

However, once you are out there, the responses will be immediate. If you have said one wrong word, you will get hammered, in a flash. And if someone comments positively and if you do not respond, the person who commented could get upset, because everybody is seeking instant gratification. Some people actually would give feedback on brands and products, expecting them to recognize their effort. If brands don't do that, they will lose out. You have to keep your eye on the ball at all times, and that consumes a lot of time too.

If brands don't know what they are doing on digital, they could easily get lost in the clutter too. There is too much information on digital platforms and your brand will find hefty competition, not only locally, but also globally. How would you stand out in the clutter?

If you haven't mastered the digital tools, then the money you spent on your

campaign is going to be a waste. The more you know how to manipulate the tools and available technology, the safer you are going with digital marketing. If not, you could be in great trouble.

Is it correct to say that digital can make or break a person or brand?

Of course, it's not actually only digital, communication can make or break a person or a brand. Digital makes that process faster. If you remember President Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky case – he actually became more popular after that incident because of the way he handled his communication after the incident. Whereas Donald Trump's popularity dropped from a comment made when he was not even thinking of politics. It is the same thing with digital, you say the right thing you will rise to the top. You say one wrong word, and you will be at the bottom.

That's why having a communication strategy is extremely important. The plan will define what to say, what not to say, the tone of voice, and who you are talking to, what are you going to say, and more. Unfortunately, in Sri Lanka, most do not think of digital as part of their mainstream communication and don't bother with sticking to the fundamentals.

Digital has to follow the same umbrella thought, the same big idea, or the same campaign. If you keep it within those parameters, you would be safe because then the brand carries the same values forward. The minute it is random, you expose yourself to a lot of risks, unless it happens to be a clever tactical move.



What can you tell us about the responsible use of digital?

Just like everywhere else, responsible behavior is critical in the digital world too. You have to remember that you will be held accountable for your actions. Maybe not by law, but by the people. If not, at least by your own conscience. Being ethical should be the most important thing we practice – as human beings first, and then as marketers and advertisers.

We must use good judgment and common sense – especially in critical situations because social media spreads without control. When you let something out, you can't expect the Government to control it for you. If we don't self-regulate, the Government will have no option but to bring in strict guidelines and laws that would leave very little room for creativity, or even communication. It is better for us to discipline ourselves, be respectful, and be ethical – responsible behaviour begins with one's self, not with the Government.

And let's not forget that it is our job to be responsible towards the brand too. So it is vital to be relevant and respect the brand personality. Each piece of communication must build the brand, not destroy it. It is disheartening to see some legendary Sri Lankan brands are being random and topical – only for the sake of likes and hits. Digital media has to be playful and entertaining, but not at the cost of the brand.

In terms of digital, what is the way forward?

I would say, stick to the basics. Always re- member digital is not only social media. It is not a separate entity that works in isolation, but yet another channel of communication. Digital and social media marketing should be part of the overall communication strategy.

Don't forget your DNA. Don't forget who you are, stick to your values, and then generate or create content that is actually true to your brand, relevant to your brand and most importantly, ensure your content is shareable. You have to make sure your content is liked by people. It is only then that they will share it, and talk about your brand. That's how your brand story spreads. Once you create content, optimize it, boost it. Use SEO, SEM, PPC's – there are so many tools that can be used to make your brand amplify visibility.

It is not merely about uploading a post on social media there's much more to the process.

Once optimized, there are tools to analyze the effect and the impact of your communication. Apply those tools, get the analytics, then deploy the corrective measures if needed. Use the results of the analytics to make sure that you go back to creating content – even more relevant and even more effective this time around. Follow these steps and do it properly for your brand to grow. Be consistent on social media feeds. If you do just one digital burst and forget about it, it is worse than not doing it at all.

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Don't be afraid to talk to the experts. There are many tools and tactics in digital that Sri Lankans may not even heard of. We collaborate with some experts in Russia and Israel for example, for seemingly impossible tasks. Their response time and success rate is something we all can benefit from.

Brands, when they generate their own content, become storytellers. Sometimes you don't have a story to tell because at times you may run out of ideas and there's

nothing else to do. That's when media stunts help you keep your brand alive. For example, Emirates did a beautiful video of two guys in wingsuits flying alongside an Airbus A380 over Burj Khalifa. It was a captivating video that everyone shared – and such stunts would give the brand great visibility and mileage.

At Blink, we drove a Range Rover from Saudi Arabia through the empty quarter – which is the largest desert and the most dangerous part in record time and crossed over into the motor show in Dubai. That was, again, a story that elevated the brand while generating valuable exposure.

That said, remember some media stunts work and some don't. For example, Coca-Cola delivered some drinks to construction workers on a drone in Dubai a few years ago. Personally, I don't believe construction workers are their target audience; they could have delivered to some other place, like a football stadium. In my opinion, it was a good idea that was poorly executed and did not reflect well on the brand.

Such stunts can be used to give a brand a lot of mileage. But before we get to that point, Sri Lankan brands will have to have their own stories and build consistency in communicating them well. That would be the future of digital from a story-telling perspective for Sri Lankan brands.

On the international arena, we see a massive shift in people's time on devices towards usage of apps. If you take someone who's using a smartphone, 86 percent of their time is actually spent on apps. Those days when Steve Jobs introduced the iPhone, the first thing we did was a Google search because the internet was fun on a smartphone. Today it's not about the internet, it's more about the apps.

Why do people prefer apps? Because it is very private and intimate. Through an app, you will create your profile, you have your likes and dislikes. Invariably what you do is, you build your second avatar. For example, when you shop on an app, it provides an intimate experience that cannot be offered in a shop or anywhere else. Apps are taking over, people are spending more and more time on apps. There are apps to tell you how well you brushed your teeth or how well you slept; apps can monitor your home while away and there is an app for almost everything now.

Apps are a good sign for marketers because that way, they are getting even closer to the consumer. This is why we must remember that digital marketing is not only social media marketing; digital marketing is a lot more.

And let's not forget that we are a digital- literate country, exceeding computer literacy by far. What it means is if you look at the population, those who know how to use a smartphone outnumbers those who know how to use a computer by far.

Digital literacy helps us to connect with more people, and as a result, more and more people are using smartphones, not computers. Computer usage for online is declining. What does it mean to brands or even Governments? Something very simple, think smartphone first. If you look at any of the government websites, they have not even thought about the mobile. When are they going to wake up and realize that the majority of the country is using smartphones to access their website? These kinds of observations must be second nature to us, if we were to succeed in digital.

Sri Lanka, as a country, has to be aware of these trends and progress with time. For example, TRC (Telecom Regulatory Authority) should know that by 2021, 80 percent of social media content would be video. They should have measures in place today, allowing the service providers to increase bandwidth and provide better service today – and be future ready. But the reality? There are certain service providers, who do not have even 3G within Colombo city limits. This affects tourism as well because tourists – specifically vloggers (video-bloggers) – are unable to upload content that promotes our beautiful land, due to poor internet connections. Lack of preparedness for the future, or the digital age, affects all of us in so many ways. 2021 is not far away, it is only two years down the line. We cannot even talk about AI, IoT or any data-driven solutions without being updated as a nation. Therefore, as a Government, as individuals, we have to think of the future, and the future is not far away. The future is happening now.

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