

Giant among Giants



Dilki Wijesuriya

The success story behind LDB Lintas

WE ARE BIGGER AND BRIGHTER THAN MOST of them' says Lilamani Dias Benson, managing director and joint owner of LDB Lintas, comparing the 4 1/2 year old

company with Sri Lanka's top advertising agencies who have been around 30-40 years. This is because of our new thinking. From the inception we set up different values where we adopted a 'do your own thing' concept, we don't have peons to fetch and carry for us. For instance the staff are provided with a coffee machine to make their own coffee. They are encouraged to think there is dignity in what they do. That way there is fire, action and style, we do not have hangers around waiting to do somebody's bidding. Even the vibrant red and gray decor at Lintas is different. Everyone sits on a red chair which is termed the 'hot seat. It is totally because of this different philosophy and working culture that we have forged ahead' she enumerates.

LDB Lintas, in the short space of their operation has amply proved that these new methods and modern thinking have worked for them. They were computerized from the beginning at a time when advertising agencies in the country were not into computers. According to Benson it was afterwards that many agencies decided to follow suite.

The expertise and experience Benson brings in to her agency is extensive. The former head of J Walter Thompson, a familiar name in advertising, Benson resigned when she married the then lead client of that agency. There was no way I could have been married to my husband and run the agency at the same time. It would have been too much of a conflict of interests. And after having worked continuously for over 25 years I decided I needed a break. During the 3 1/2 year period between her quitting JWT and the formation of Lintas, Benson has not been idle. She worked in advertising, marketing & business management in Singapore along with her husband, where she gained immense experience in modern techniques and saw a totally different approach to advertising. On returning to Sri Lanka she did free lance consultancy work.

It was sometime during this period that Lintas Worldwide contacted the Bensons with a view to forming an operation in Sri Lanka. Discussions and negotiations had gone on for months before the Bensons accepted what was a very good offer. Says Benson, 'my experience in Singapore, the different standards I saw applied there, helped immensely when we finally set up here. I was able to bring in my own values, my own philosophy and the Lintas Worldwide philosophy and their professional tools to Sri Lanka and in setting up their company, bring my personality in to play as well. Apart from all that, it is so much more than a job because we have a stake in the company. My husband who is the chairman of the company, and I, are joint owners of LDB Lintas which is affiliated to Lintas Worldwide.' She says

working with her husband requires imagination and patience on both sides. They are both very different people where he is a sound businessman and she is quintessentially the artist. But they compliment each other a lot and make a fine balance.

The agency has since overtaken many other establishments much older, bigger and longer established. According to Benson they have set out to blaze new trails and woken up an advertising industry which was rather bored, smug and content with very mediocre standards. In their early days with a core group of just twelve people they were winning pitch presentations against Ad Agencies ten times their size.

The first milestone Lintas achieved was to win a presentation for a big client immediately after their launch against the then top advertising agency in the country. Says Benson W were just one month old and the only advertising agency so new to be invited to vie for the account, amongst several other to agencies. After the initial presentation of credentials we were in the short list along with only one other agency which was the time considered the No 1 agency in Sri Lanka. When the final presentation to the client was made our competitor came with an expatriate creative director and altogether 18 people as opposed to our 4. We had the client's entire board sitting judgment and we were informed the next day that it was the unanimous decision to give us the account. The actual words used by the CEO of the Company were "you were streets ahead of the other agency, you had much sharper strategy and much more compelling creative" These are words I have quoted much since they were uttered by this first client."

Their second major milestone was turning around a soft drinks brand which already had a place in the market but was fast eroding each year. Lintas took over the brand and instead of launching it as a whole range which was what they were doing earlier, repositioned each one separately for a different target group. Benson emphasizes Today they are market leaders. They out sell and do better than big international names with much larger budgets.

A more recent achievement for Lintas was acquiring the account of a telecommunications company who although one year in operations at the time, had not made progress in making a name for themselves or in using their brand. They had not got their connections despite the huge demand in Sri Lanka's telecom market. three months after Lintas running campaigns for them, the company has virtually achieved their one year's target.

These are just a few of the milestones the Agency has achieved. They work with brand leaders. Many brands have been brought to their door, either because they have been in trouble or dying of old age and neglect, their image depleted or positioning blurred due to mediocre advertising. The man aging director of Lintas claims 'we are really proud of having nursed those brands back to health and in fact to brand lead position. Today we have a large number of market leads brands in the Agency and we have contributed hugely to putting them there. Another plus factor for Lintas is the partnership relationship they have with their clients. They see themselves as business partners with their clients who work together towards common goals.

In a survey carried out by the agency, they have come out as the "Most Creative" by 90% respondents. This year many TV channels and news paper houses have voted Lintas as having achieved the highest billing upto end October. In Benson's view it is quite possible that Lintas will end the year with the highest billing in the country which would without doubt place them in the No. 1 slot.

However, there are some things Benson hopes would change in time to come. She says that only a few business people recognize that they really need a strong ad agency resource to help their businesses thrive. Some try their hardest to make sure the agency doesn't make money or try to bleed them dry. This she says is a very short sighted policy and not only weakens the agency, but in the end would result in the client, the whole marketing fraternity suffering.

Asked if Sri Lanka has enough talent in the advertising field to do the rounds Benson says "By a long shot no enough, mainly because there is no proper training ground in this country. The university curriculum does not have a graphic for advertising as a profession or for commercial writing. We do have marketing and business studies to some extent and that certainly helps but the artistic fields are not really catered to, which means we have to take youngsters and train them. What happens then is people tend to go from agency to agency demanding higher salaries and senior designations before they have learned their craft or become true craftsmen or women. That is hard because the agencies become prey to this situation. Lintas' present human resources strength is 85 and they take in a number of new people each year for training and around 5 are sent for overseas training to Lintas offices abroad.

Talking of the local media Benson says she is very excited about the number of TV channels we have although I am not sure if there is room for that many channels.

Some of them are dying but it is nice if we have them because it is very healthy to have a large number of radio stations, TV stations & publications. However she is of the opinion that what this country lacks is enough magazines. Without this lack being remedied she feels that Sri Lanka really cannot claim to have variety in terms of media.

Asked how according to her experience, Sri Lanka rates in the international advertising scene the managing director of Lintas has this to say, "Conceptually there is absolutely nothing wrong with the best of Sri Lanka. The best in this country are conceptually very good and they understand the professionalism that applies i.e. positioning, focus, relevance, brand personality, the 4 important keys to doing good ad



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-vertising. They understand these aspects and at least try to bring them into play." However, she says that our production values are very poor. We don't have good photographers or good TV production people, we don't have enough music although it is the best resource available in comparison with the other two, especially photography which is mediocre in the extreme. Sadly though, the marketing fraternity will not pay for better quality, they get by with mediocre talent. Some are willing to pay for better talent which means our standards are improving but we are still a long way from the desired production values and this is something I feel the marketing fraternity should think about."

According to the current trend she says, the highest paying category at present are banks and financial institutions, however this is something that could change with the economy and the increase in consumers' buying power.

The latest venture of Lintas is Initiative Media' a new company they have formed. Although it has been up and running for about a year it was in the last six months that the company has begun to function as a separate entity and in the last 3 months it acquired its first very own client. Initiative Media offers clients the unique skill in the form of Specialized Media Planning and Buying. Lintas pioneered the concept, the disciplines and the proprietary software to handle Central Media Buying in Sri Lanka and they are the first to acquire a group of clients for whom

they handle that highly specialized task on an exclusive basis. Although Initiative Media is a separate company, its 'optimizer technique is offered to all Lintas clients as well and this way clients would receive the benefit of more judicious planning and buying as well as more mileage for their Ad Spend. Apart from the creative product that's gives Lintas huge competitive edge.

Explaining the secret of their success the managing director says it is all about being very good at whatever one chooses to do. 'I create a working environment that is very stimulating. I detest mediocrity. I set myself the highest standards. High stand- ands are an automatic expectation in this agency. Happily most people are excited by that, rather than frightened off and move themselves several notches higher here than anywhere else they have worked. People who sometimes drift away lose that edge in another agency because there is a curious mix of elements in Lintas that is not there in others."

Asked what this mix is she laughs 'Fire! Passion! Going for the unexpected, the unpredictable answer to the brief. Pushing yourself till you experience a 'high'. A lot of talented people who constantly bounce off each other. A hands-on boss who is never at a loss for an idea herself