Integrity Is As Important As Creativity

An advertising agency that has been a pioneer in the industry, Masters Advertising has reached a milestone. Celebrating 52 years of building brands in Sri Lanka, the agency has set an example of being ethical in this competitive field. Dharshi Thambiah, Joint Managing Director of Masters is following in the footsteps of her father by striving to maintain the founding principles of the organisation. She speaks about the journey of Masters as well as the plans that will take this advertising agency to the next level.

By Udeshi Amarasinghe

Photography Mahesh Bandara

Masters is celebrating 52 years in the industry, can you tell us how it all started?
Masters was started by my father Cyril Masilamani in 1963. I would describe it as a faith walk, because the very name Masters is an acknowledgement of the Lord and Master he honoured and served. He started the company with only four people at that time. We are very proud to be one of the pioneering advertising agencies in Sri Lanka. I joined Masters 18 years ago; since this is a family business, you could say that advertising is in my blood. Advertising was always a topic of conversation at home, at the dining table or whenever we went on holiday, so the foundation for my interest in advertising was sown in my childhood. I started as the finance director never dreaming that someday I would have to take over the reins. But someone above obviously had other plans and today I am running the company, ensuring that the operations go smoothly. My brother Mike Masilamani is my Joint Managing Director. He works behind the scenes as the Creative Director assuring that all our campaigns are unique and have the desired impact.

As a pioneering advertising agency what are the focus areas of the organisation?
We are engaged in both above the line advertising as well as below the line advertising. Today we concentrate not only on print, radio and television, but also on promotions and events. As a long standing agency, we see it our responsibility to advise clients on what works best for them. We are also looking at starting an advertising school sometime in the future, because we believe that there is a need for this in Sri Lanka where we can share our knowledge with the next generation. There is a dearth in skilled and talented young people, which makes it very difficult to find good copywriters and creative individuals. We need a good advertising school in Sri Lanka.

Master’s take pride in the fact that all its campaigns are based on the truth, which is something quite rare today. Can you elaborate on this?
One thing that was instilled in me by my father is that our integrity is as important as our creativity. As a result we look at building long term relationships with our

clients. True it is a business, but we are just as passionate as the client about building their brands. From the very beginning we strive to ensure that the bond we build with our clients is based on trust and respect.

What makes the campaigns by Masters unique?
Advertising has evolved and it is not what it was a few decades ago. In this new age, I believe that we have to have the passion to challenge the norm and the mediocre. We have to be different in our advertising campaigns so that the consumer cannot ignore them-from events to promotions-whatever will engage the consumer and build loyalty. The only constant is the credibility of the claims we make.

Can you tell us how Masters as a pioneering organisation, has contributed to the advertising industry in Sri Lanka?
Starting with my father, Masters has been known to be a very ethical organisation. We do not handle alcohol or tobacco; however, this was not always the case. At one point my father questioned what habits and lifestyles we were promoting and decided to give these up. It was not an easy decision as these are big budget clients, yet my father decided that we have a responsibility to our society.

These are not easy principles to adhere to in the age of increasing consumerism and greed. Yet I passionately believe that we can use our communication skills to send a positive message and make the world a better place-idealistic as that sounds!

With the economy growing, the market is large enough for every agency to get work. We should maintain our standards and be ethical in whatever we do. We have had good times and bad, but through it all, we have stood strong.

What are your thoughts on the current state of the advertising industry in Sri Lanka?
We need to work together as an industry. There is so much we can learn from each other. I am a board member of the Four A’s and we have many plans to grow the industry, by having workshops and various other programmes, so that the

advertising industry regains its credibility. Many people view the ad industry with suspicion today; we need to change that. Advertising in Sri Lanka can only get better if the industry works together.

How can we get the industry to work together?
This is why we have the Four A's, which is active today. The members on the board are making every effort to bring in all the agencies together. One of our aims is to revive the Chillie Ad awards, which were not held over the past few years due to various controversies. In the end who suffered? It was the advertising industry. Many have realised that today and they are willing to work with the Four A's to revive the advertising industry and also to ensure that all agencies cooperate and work in an ethical manner.

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What are your thoughts on the future of the advertising industry?
We have to constantly re-invent ourselves. The advertising industry can never cease to exist, but as an advertising agency, we have to attend workshops and update ourselves continuously.

Today advertising is not only about creativity, but is also about speed and technology, because clients need their work done quickly. We are not given much time, but we have to deliver if we want the business; we have to move with the times. During my father's time everything was done by hand, where the ads were either painted or drawn but today we have computers and new technology. We have to move with the time and keep abreast with the trends in the global market.

Final thoughts?
We will work on establishing an advertising school. Masters also represent the Economist and Financial Times in Sri Lanka in anticipation of the global market that

we will have to increasingly address. We will definitely look at expanding Masters. There are many projects in the pipeline, but as I have always said it is a faith walk, God decides the direction that my business should take.

I would like to tell people that advertising is a very interesting and rewarding profession to be in. Somehow many young people seem to think that advertising is not a business to get into, but though it is challenging, the satisfaction that you get in building brands is incredibly gratifying. It is a great career!