

Irvin Weerackody



Unlike most advertising agency heads who tend to maintain flamboyant high profiles, Irvin Weerackody, chairman of Phoenix Advertising is the reticent type who has to be cajoled into giving an interview.

But upon meeting the man what a pleasure it is to encounter someone who admits advertising is not everything: Nihile he has over the past 25 years built Phoenix into the country’s number two agency through sheer grit and hard work. Irvin the man, is a multi-faceted personality with interests in agriculture, environment, music, art and travel; something of a renaissance man. Fondly referred to as Boss by his colleagues with whom he has a close rapport, Irvin is the archetype of the self-made man.

He started his working life as a journalist and basically progressed into advertising in the early 70’s, because journalism then as now, was a poorly paid profession. He began as a junior copywriter for International Advertising, a leading agency at the time, but soon lost his job when the agency closed shop due to unfavorable conditions in the country.

Irvin vividly explains, ‘I cannot help recall the scenario that existed from the early 70’s to 1977. Some people say we had a recession, but historically global recessions have lasted only a year or so. This recession lasted almost seven years. So, I tend to think it was more a repression of the economy rather than a recession because it was a situation enforced by the policies of the then government. Of course, they very sincerely believed that, that was the path for development, but in that system there was no place for free enterprise. As a result, advertising and marketing had to operate within a very stagnant and decadent framework. I often wonder if I was a Vitim or beneficiary of that scenario.’

This Irvin explains, was the backdrop to his decision to start .t1S advertising agency at the age of twenty or so, despite skepticism expressed by many friends and colleagues. ‘My thinking vas simple. I thought this recession or repression would not forever. I thought that period be a great experience for me so I started a small one man, one room agency in 1972. I was in the early twenties.’

Despite the fact that it was not an ideal environment in which to start an advertising agency, Irvin vent ahead slowly collecting customers along the way. One of his first clients was the Family Planning Association and this was a Challenge because at that time in Sri Lanka like in India there was a lot of cultural and religious resistance. Ile recalls that some facilities even thought family planning was aimed at eliminating the Sinhala nation! Irvin cleverly used in his campaign a certain sutra from Buddhism which advocated the middle path in support of family planning.

In his first year of operation, while still a one man show, Irvin vas able to get about five accounts, including Eveready Batteries, his first multinational client. From then on there was no looking back as he took on more staff and expanded. Irvin proudly claims one of his artists has been him for twenty years and his director for fifteen. At this point he explains at my but reluctantly on his part his novel concept and implementation of share holding for his After nearly a quarter the business, a far sighted man like irvin realized the

need to plan ahead. ‘I thought at some stage I should plan for a phased withdrawal;

you can’t do this till you are seventy five. In advertising you work for twelve hours a day, it’s tough! So I thought I must have a system of shareholders where 50-60% of people must hold shares in the company. I wanted to make a start so in 1993 1 made thirteen people shareholders and for the last so many years they have got their dividends.’

He proudly adds that Phoenix was the only company in the industry to pay two months bonus last year, despite it being a bad year with all the problems of power cuts and so on. It was a tradition he was keen to maintain.

The idea of making his employees shareholders is ‘to give them a stake in the business, make them more responsible and committed and as an incentive to them but also to the others.’

Irvin is keen to add to the company’s shareholders but is insistent that it has to be on the basis of performance and contribution. Of course any shareholder leaving the company has to surrender his shares and this is understandable in a tight-knit community. He is also quite sure that he would not want Phoenix to become a public company, based on the bad experiences of several global agencies where people have manipulated shares and bought over the companies.

Irvin sums up his intentions by saying, ‘I feel my people must in- herit this agency. I have nearly one hundred people and we are a family!’

For a man who started out in advertising against the odds, Irvin has always been keen to maintain his agency’s national or Sri Lankan identity and has therefore long resisted tying-up with a multinational as many other agencies have done. However he finally realized that a tie-up would be a great advantage particularly in the area of training and to this end Phoenix today is part of the renowned Ogilvy and Mather network. As a result, the agency has benefited from O&M inputs, personnel and clients.

Irvin speaks enthusiastically about the recent foreign and local training he has been able to offer his people. For instance, last February, he organized a 4-day residential workshop on ‘Brand Stewardship’ using O&M regional resource personnel. Brand Steward- ship is the art of brand building and there are certain proprietary tools that go with the exercise, which Phoenix inherited after the workshop and this Irvin feels really energized the agency. ‘We have benefited immensely because the resources of O&M worldwide are available to us in the area of creativity, strategies planning,

media etc. Also, as a result of this tie-up we have got some of their global accounts. They benefit because their clients are looked after here and they get equity in our agency. But I remain independent and the discretion is mine.'

Today, Phoenix has an impressive list of multinational clients including Coca-Cola, Anchor, Bata, SmithKline Beecham, British Air- ways, Cadburys, IBM, Unilever, Nokia and Guinness as well as a whole array of leading local clientele such as Ceylineo, Seylan Bank, Ceylon Brewery and Ceylon Biscuits. Irvin can afford to be eon- tented with these achievements for in his own words he does not think advertising is big business in Sri Lanka. He cites India as having massive markets and equally missive budgets and this allows for a large multinational presence, but Sri Lanka according to him is a small market with a total ad spend of a little over one billion rupees. As for the presence of multinational agencies in the country he feels we have reached saturation point, yet he still knows of multi- nationals looking at Sri Lanka for tie-ups in the case of certain products.

does Irvin Weeraekody look for in the people he employs?

It is a 'sparkle, a certain something,' but according to him those qualities are getting harder and harder to find these days. He feels the biggest problem in this country is the lack of quality people in every field and he predicts the country is heading for disaster.

He reeolleets nostalgically the high calibre of people the country produced twenty-five years ago, rattling off lists of eminent lawyers and civil servants, the likes of which are no more and never will be again.

Still a journalist at heart, he is appalled at the state of journalism

today and attributes it partly to the existing educational system, partly to the total lack of motivation youngsters today show in improving their knowledge and furthering their prospects.

A bilingual reporter in his heyday, Irvin used to cover parliament and enjoyed it tremendously. 'Those days going to parliament was like going to university. I know something about agriculture and coconut cultivation and that is from listening to a certain backbencher in parliament who spoke very well on agriculture. The big guns like Dudley Senanayake, N M Perera and Colvin R de Silva were so interesting you learnt a lot. I have a collection of hansards from that period but I no longer collect

them; there’s nothing to read!’

Irvin sees advertising as a challenge. Selling something is a tough task and you have to develop a strategy, which is a skill he has mastered over the years. ‘For twenty years I ran the agency with an iron fist,’ he confesses. ‘I was head of the agency and ereative director, which was an agonizing exercise. At that time I created a reputation for financial advertising like share issues, bank advertising etc. We were the pioneers in share marketing. Back in the 80’s which was a boom period, there was money in the rural areas, tourism was booming, but the share market was catering to an elitist market. We presented a campaign for the Sampath Bank share issue to the Brokers Association and they liked the educational component of it; educating people on how to buy and trade shares. We launched that campaign and within ten days the issue was oversubscribed — 40% of the shareholders were from rural areas.’

Much of the recent success of Phoenix’s projects can perhaps be attributed to the importance placed on research, which is now carried out by its own unit. Says Irvin, ‘ I have given strategic planning pride of place in the agency.

Now we present a strategic plan to the client before proceeding to creatives and so on. I don’t like on a speculative basis, I like to develop a line a theme pretest it.’

To avoid having to resort to research agencies all the time Irvin has developed his own system he uses university students to go out with questionnaires acquire the information he which is then analyzed by as unit. The client is not charged this input, it is for the agency’s own gain.

These risks have obviously paid off because Phoenix ean boast of an impressive array of awards, including two international awards. One was a Max Lewis Merit Award for Public Service Campaigns, Ahieh Phoenix won for their ‘recovery of agricultural credit’ campaign in 1982, and the second in 1993 was a Max Lewis Bronze Award for their Janasaviya Campaign. The objective of this campaign was to change the public perception of Janasaviya from a welfare scheme to a production-oriented program. Irvin and his team produced a campaign where a hundred people were selected from Janasaviya support teams and trained to communicate this message at grass roots level, accompanied by a national awareness press campaign

Through the years Irvin has also given a lot of his time to public service

assignments. He was a member of the National Information Strategy Coordinating Committee, the only private sector member on the committee and a member of the Presidential Commission on NGO’s in 1992. He also manages to find the time to lecture in journalism and mass communication at the Colombo University, something he does happily because he says he learns a lot from the students themselves.

Irvin the agriculturist and gentleman farmer owns a multi-crop property and he feels that with a proper policy and adequate technology Sri Lanka’s agricultural sector ean do very well. There are particular native crops which he feels, are well-suited for mass production for export. In his own gar- den nestled in his magnificent house in Colombo, 34 varieties of dry zone trees, some of them rare, flourish and provide a soothing environment for the senses, giving him great enjoyment in his moments of relaxation.

Travel does go with the job somewhat, but a special highlight in his hectic routine was when the British Conservative Party during its recent election campaign, invited Irvin and four others to observe and study parliamentary democracy at work. This exposure was a great experience says a man who has been a keen follower of polities since his youthful journalistic days, but who says a political career for himself is not on the cards.

It seems a pity that a man like Irvin Weeraekody does not maintain a higher profile for he knows his stuff and has much to contribute to the advertising community. On the future of advertising in this country, his response to my observation that the advertising community is very divided is, ‘agencies if united can make a great contribution. We are not just selling consumer goods, we are selling concepts, we can change attitudes, motivate people to do things for the public good.’

Yes, we definitely should see and hear more of Irvin Weeraekody and hopefully this interview will not be the last!



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