

Reinventing Minds

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Reinventing a company is truly an unenviable task but you took on the job in March leaving a much enjoyed job at another leading agency. What excites you about working at Minds FCB?

Minds FCB poses a challenge. It is an Agency that has a good track record. It has been in the industry, in the business of advertising, for nearly 25 years. Minds FCB has been perceived as being a stable marketing communications Agency that has grown from very small beginnings to what it is today. I would say that Minds FCB is among the top 10 agencies in the country. I have come into Minds FCB at a juncture when the company needs to surge forward because it has certain objectives that have to be achieved from a business point of view as well as from an image perspective. Those are the challenges that are interesting to me. I feel like I have a job to do.

What do you see as your role as the CEO of Minds?

Very definitely it's to build a specific image for this Agency. And to support that image with a track record of success in what we do as an agency, positioning the Agency as one of the top five agencies in the country.

You've been in the "hot seat" for only a few months. From where you are now, what are some of the challenges you're obviously going to face in achieving these goals?

Actually, there's a downside to an agency that's grown from small beginnings and has been in the business for almost 25 years. There's a lot to unlearn, a lot to undo before starting to build again. And that - for any company - is a challenge because change is not something that a lot of people are willing to accept. And this being a peoples business, change therefore will come with some difficulty. If we don't change then we might just not be able to survive in this new world.

What are the key changes that Minds FCB is going through in this transition?

The single, key change is that we need to look at the agency from a business perspective and a bottom line perspective and ensure that certain structural changes are carried out in order to have a better bottom line than we do now. There's nothing wrong with what was done earlier, it's just that it was a different set of ideas, a different philosophy at that time because the company and the industry itself was geared differently. But now, given the external factors in terms of the market, it's imperative that we look at our bottom line more seriously than we did before.

Downsizing is never easy. And almost all CEOs say it's one of the hardest things to do. How are you dealing with this difficult task, in a company with over 70 people?

How I think we should be dealing with it is first and foremost very humanely, because there are people who have given some of the best years of their life to the growth of this company. So it's just not possible to turn around and say goodbye. And that is not what we plan to do. Rather, it would be a question of recruiting in the right places, not replacing people who leave and encouraging inter departmental transfers by identifying people with talent in a particular sphere to replace people who have moved out. This is so that we really make use of the people we have. We're also in the process of identifying "Stars" - and those stars will be nurtured and trained, they will be intrinsically helped to move forward, thereby moving the Agency forward. But there would be others who would not be moving along with us, who will realise then that maybe for them to move forward perhaps they need to be in a different field or a different place of work. Those will be subtle ways in which we will need to restructure and downsize.

If you were to put your finger on what went wrong with Minds FCB, what led to reaching this point where the agency needed reinvention?

It is not a question of right or wrong. It is a question of re engineering to meet the brand communication needs of clients today. Personally, I think the reason for the need to restructure was the dynamics of the present culture we live in, which is different to what was there before. The agencies that were set up earlier in Sri Lanka were set up for the love of it. Basically, people with a passion for advertising set up advertising agencies. And they thrived on their desire to be creative, to be involved in the development of communications and advertising. !, wouldn't call that a very professional business model, it was more a passionate individualistic venture. The agencies set up at that time were usually family agencies, or with

single owners and proprietary concerns. The market and the country at that time allowed for such a laid back approach, it allowed people to live their dreams without having to be very concerned about competition, or thinking seriously about their bottom lines. I must say sadly, that this reality doesn't exist anymore. Today, we live in a more competitive world, a world that is far more mercenary than it used to be. Therefore, the market dynamics force all of us to run a slick, lean, mean outfit that definitely is bottom-line targeted. I do believe though that we must jealously guard the values from the past, but it's the bottom line that drives the business today.

As a new CEO, what is the philosophy that you bring in to Minds FCB?

I am driven by the fact that I would need to maintain the family atmosphere and the humane values and principles that govern an agency like Minds FCB. But I also want to bring in the professionalism and the measures that have to be taken in order to be a cutting edge, competitive, professional, marketing communications agency. That would be the difficult task I'm setting myself. Because very often these two aspects don't go together. The book "God is my CEO" by Larry S Julian has influenced me because it captures what I have been battling with - very often, we have to sacrifice our personal beliefs and our personal value systems in order to run a profitable business. This book explains how it is possible to have a bottomline driven company without sacrificing your values and your principles. Now if I was able to turn this Agency into a mix of its old values and make it a more profitable, cutting edge communications partner that clients trust and rely on, then I think I would have achieved what I set out to do.

Stepping into the shoes of a predecessor is never easy. Stepping into the shoes of the Founder CEO is perhaps even harder. How big are these boots that you have to fill?

BIG! A company is always reflective of a CEO's character and life and his philosophy on how business should be done. And that is clearly the story where Minds FCB is concerned. Ryan Jayatunge, is a man who clearly emulated "Boss" the late legendary Deshabandu Reggie Candappa, the doyen of the local advertising industry who relied on him to build his second agency, a man whose character is reflected in this agency. Minds FCB is known as a dedicated Agency partner that has built solid relationships within and without the agency and built partnerships that have extended over a number of years. Those are values that need to be replicated, values that need to be taken further. I believe I too have similar traits or similar

characteristics and definitely the same benefactor in “Boss” so it won’t be that difficult to follow in my predecessor’s footsteps while making some essential business oriented changes.

The advertising industry is seen as one that often talks about team work while on the other hand nurturing and encouraging a few prima donnas. Which category best describes Minds FCB?

There are certainly prima donnas in this industry – within all sections of an agency. But in the few months I’ve been here, I’ve been fascinated to find that there are no prima donnas at Minds FCB. That, in my opinion is a big plus. It’s a strength because teamwork can’t happen when there are prima donnas – there’s an absolutely seamless action group that works here that is willing to accept that every idea we develop is our idea and not my idea. It has become the agency culture, which I initially found surprising because normally in this industry there is an “I” culture. But at Minds, I see a concerted effort on everybody’s part to say “We”.



Quick Profile

Rohan Rajaratnam is a qualified accountant by profession. Having studied in India, he joined Grant McCann Erickson in the mid '80s and as an Account Executive went on to handle some of the largest brands in the country. He was at Grant McCann Erickson for over 18 years and grew with the agency, rising to become a Director on its Board of Management. He took a break from the advertising industry in the mistaken notion that he wanted a change, but that excursion lasted only 12 months. He returned promptly to the industry he loved best and worked with Triad for nearly two years. From there the challenge of reinventing Minds FCB beckoned, and it was a challenge he couldn't resist.