

Host

It is not easy nowadays to earn consumers' trust as a brand. Many mistakes and failed campaigns have created a level of distrust that needs further effort to be improved. However, it's not impossible to build trust with your consumers. All you need is the genuine interest in what your consumers expect from you. In this episode of Mrigashira, our first guest is brand guru and strategist Harish Bijoor, Founder of Harish Bijoor Consults Inc.

Host

Saffola has been trying to enter the competitive honey market, it hurled allegations against competition, you know Sebamed soap brand called out PH content in their rival soap brands and in this uncertain world when winning consumer trust becomes even more difficult controversies like these, where do they leave the consumer?

Hitesh

Firstly, if you really do get the fact that we are just emerging from the COVID affected fear economy, one would intuitively and instinctively say that any kind of negative play, any kind of negative gaming, any kind of comparative advertising, any kind of poking your fingers into the eyes of the competition, and speaking is not okay. However, just as we were getting out of the pandemic inflicted blues, Sebamed decided to do a piece of advertising, which is all about putting your fingers into the eye of the competition and saying that, hey, listen, your pH level is not correct. And, and so have others attempted this. I think that was a bold move if you really ask me. In many ways, it created the excitement of 2021, we were just about entering into 2021, in the early days of January, and you had Sebamed doing this, created a bit of a buzz. And I think that buzz itself was to an extent worth it because it reinvigorated the world of marketing once again, you know.

Host

Right but tell me, I mean, I know one way to argue is that, you know, this is a perfect way to get Sebamed known, but was it really fair for Sebamed to compare itself with brands, which are not competing at the same price point.

Hitesh

Well, the fact is that nothing is fair in love, war, and marketing. So, you know, a marketer can do n numbers of things. Was it fair for Sebamed to compare its pH and say that, you know, I'm superior? Well, it's a marketing strategy, a piece of strategy, which Sebamed used. Sebamed simple thinking was obviously that, hey listen, we are a tiny player in this market, the market is dominated by HUL. And HUL has a clutch of soaps in the category, let me establish a negative relationship vis a vis HUL's PH. And I think they attempted it and got away with it and got away with it. I say, because by the time the court stepped in and said that you can do this, Sebamed had it second generation ad ready, and it was more polite, it was not competitive. And to that extent the task had already been achieved, and done by the time the rulings came in.

Host

But would you call this comparative advertising or ambush marketing or are these cheap publicity gimmicks to mop up sales and garner instant visibility? Where do you or India is ready for things like this? I mean, it's time that India became more, you know, out there, when it comes to marketing.

Hitesh

I would have been tempted in the old days to call it a way of attaining cheap publicity, but not anymore. Because, you know, publicity always comes at a particular price, and is not cheap anymore. And Sebamed

has spent a fair bit of money to establish this kind of an equation. I think Sebamed was really talking about the science of Ph and it said that the only thing that I have is the science. And if I'm on the right side of science, why don't I actually point it out and tell people that 5.5 is superior to 10. And therefore, they establish that very unique equation. If you saw the print ads, it simply said that Sebamed is 5.5 and you know, Lux is 10. In the same line, they showed Sebamed is 5.5 and Rin is 10, nowhere did they say that Lux is equal to Rin but, I think with one oblique scalene equation they created in print, people started asking that question, is Lux equal to Rin, and that was nifty. And so, to that extent, it's not really cheap publicity, but I think it's a way of attaining attention, awareness, which it otherwise wouldn't have got.

Host

Are some of some of our consumers, the Indian consumers actually being given inferior quality products, I mean, the punch, all these controversies are kind of indicating that, you know, maybe the products are not really in line with what they are meant to be, both with the honey controversy and the soap, controversy.

Hitesh

Well, different strokes for different folks, we've have had this issue with the water at one point of time where bottled mineral water and the standards that you have in France, and in the US viz-a-viz in India are very, very different. And that became a big controversy. We've seen it and honey, and I think we now see it in soap, if you really look at it, I think, you know, a market is actually catered to by marketeers, who do believe that they understand what is needed at that point of time, by that market and by that consumer. So, by that standard yardstick, I would not agree to the fact that inferior products are rolled out in India, I think India is a market which recognizes superior products. Yes, sometimes things go up and down. But the rule is that we get good products for the good people of India.

Host

Right. Okay. This brings me really to the question that what would you advise brand evangelists that they should do to win consumer trust in 2021? We, know, especially like you yourself, said, at a time when the consumer is just not sure what to trust, what not to trust? And how do you win back trust?

Hitesh

Okay, see, trust is a very big word. And the brand is defined as a trust in itself because the biggest merit of a brand is the fact that it's trusted and it's trustworthy. The brand is a promise, the brand is a trust, and that promise and trust lives in the minds of consumers. And what should a brand do today? I think, you know, these have been very tough times. And in tough times, it's extremely important to have your fingers on the pulse of the consumer very, very carefully. You must appreciate that the consumer has just gone through the fear economy. The celebratory economy is not here as yet. The consumer has been pushed into a kind of a functional consumption economy. Because you know, governments and local municipalities have taken over marketing, from the hands of those who know best marketing best, which are marketeers. All of a sudden, it's coming back to marketeers. Once that gauntlet is being handed back to the marketeers, it's important for the marketeers to actually work on this trust quotient on building trust quotient back again. It's time for marketeers to look at their margins o their products, it's time to stop the erosion of their volumes and value shares. And I think it's extremely important to say that, you know, hey guys, we are with you, rather than we are with your wallet. So, I think the wallet versus the human being, I think the human being must weigh in that much heavier now than yesterday.

Host

Very well put – Brand managers need to be more conscious, lending preference to humanity vis-à-vis the wallet.

Perhaps that explains the formation of Central Consumer Protection Authority (CCPA), earlier last year and we see it coming down strongly on false claims by advertisers. On the other hand, ASCI – Advertising standards council of India, under the Chairmanship of Subhash Kamath, has been working relentlessly with his team, since coming in office, earlier last year. He talked to us about ASCI's role.

Host

Thank you, Mr. Kamath, for making the time to speak to us on Mrigashira. Let me begin by congratulating you since your appointment earlier this year, we see ASCI tightening the leash on advertisers being lot more strict in ensuring regulations, it will be good to understand your plans for 2021.

Subash Kamath

Yeah, I don't know whether we are being strict or stricter than before, I think we're just doing our due diligence, as per the guidelines laid down. And I think, I think it's our responsibility to ensure that our members are following those guidelines and staying within the corridors of freedom, as I call it. So, I don't know whether we're being stricter than before. But I think it's important to be ensuring that our guidelines are effective, and the monitoring is effective. So, if there is an improvement on that front, from the ASCI team, I will take that as a big compliment, because that was a lot been done, right? In terms of what's our vision going forward, there's a lot to be done simply we've been doing a lot of brainstorming across four or five different initiatives, actually. And we've created individual task forces for each of these initiatives. And there's a huge amount of brainstorming that's happened and recommendations are coming onto the table, which will then get more diffused. So for example, one of the big, important aspects of the year now is the formation of the government's CCPA, as you know, the Consumer Protection Act. So, we are working very closely, we are keeping in touch to the government, you must understand that any self-regulatory organization anywhere in the world, always works within the government regulations, within the law. Right. So it's always a partnership. And as a result of which we had, they have really appreciated ASCI's contribution, it's experience and the guidelines that we've created. We just recently announced guidelines for the gaming industry, and their advertising, something that wasn't there even two years ago, and working on influencer guidelines. Yeah, and there's also working on influencer guidelines now, we are revisiting some of the guidelines for the alcohol industry. So, this is an ongoing process of constantly fine tuning and improving, you know, many of these guidelines must understand what may have been relevant 10 years ago may not be relevant today, they have to be tweaked to keep in mind a changing society and a changing a communication ecosystem, right? Similarly, for example, 15-20 years ago, the focus was on creating processes, which would help what television advertising operate. Today in the world of digital, the timelines required for putting up ads and removing ads, etc. a much, much faster, therefore, ASCI processes need to also become much faster, more responsive, more interactive. So, there is a separate focus on that, how can technology help actually speed up our processes and get our members to access more from ASCI, more interactivity? So, there is a whole technological initiative that we're putting together, there's a whole initiative for social media or new media, on how we can monitor those. There is a separate initiative also in terms of how can we add more value to our members, through thought leadership, through training, through proactive lessons in understanding the guidelines, we are conducting workshops for many, we have created an E learning module, which younger people in every organization with a marketing or advertising can access, and actually go through the guidelines proactively while they are studying, while they're creating ads, they know what lines they should not cross. It's not just about the policing of the industry to manage complaints but also, it's like, if I were to take an equivalent parallel, if you want people to stop killing elephants, you don't just catch the poachers, you also educate people not to buy ivory so it's a two-pronged strategy that, therefore we have a lot of initiatives in this place, which will get unfolded and rolled out, as in when they are ready.

Host

No this is really good to know. And also, I mean, what's interesting is that you're working in tandem with CCPA because you know one sees them being very vocal and taking up cases on false claims by advertisers. But just tell me, you know, the whole Sebamed, HUL controversy that will be quoted as an example that marketeers on the growing reliance on legal action. So, does this mean that ASCI's control will be diluted in some way or are you rejigging the regulatory bodies rule

Subhash Kamath

Not at all, I think, look, we've always had the recourse, marketeers always had the recourse take to the law. Right. And we are not above the law, we are within the law, right. And ASCI a self-regulatory body, which means all our members have taken a pledge to follow certain guidelines and wherever there is a deviation from those guidelines. And whenever ASCI does ruling, believe you me, we've had almost 95% compliance from our members, which means our members are serious, responsible marketeers in the first place. And when, as in when wherever there's been a problem, or a lack of or lack of compliance, we've always been able to refer those cases to the government regulators. And it's not just the CCPA, which comes under the Department of Consumer Affairs, we've enjoyed a very healthy and partnership with the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting as well, Ministry of Ayush, FSSAI, and so on so forth. We have to work as partners and collaborate right. Now, in the Sebamed case, I think it was a clear case of a client, a marketeer choosing to take legal recourse because their brand was named, that does not take away anything from ASCI role. But if it's already in court, we won't affine on it, as simple as that, because the court is going to now decide what the ruling should be, you must understand that taking anybody to court is a long drawn out process as well. And then more expensive process. So I don't foresee people just taking more and more to court, because that takes a lot of time, money and resources. In most of the cases, I would imagine a self-regulatory mechanism would suffice in solving the solution and finding the solution. So, in my opinion, yeah, it doesn't undermine ASCI role in any way, if a member chooses to go to court, rather than come to ASCI, which is fine, there will be in 95% of the cases, I believe it is the complexity. And in some cases where the where the member feels very strongly about it, it becomes a legal recourse.

Host

So obviously, this just brings me to the last question, are you, is ASCI working very closely with advertisers, brand managers, CMO's to make them lot more conscious, and educate them as well.

Subhash Kamath

I think that are not just about ASCI, but even from a growing consumer consciousness, if you look at social media, etc. today, the consumer has a much stronger voice. Right. It's no longer about just one-way communication that used to be a decade ago. Today, consumers are participating in debate and any negative comment on a brand gets spreads like wildfire, thanks to social media. Right. And therefore, even marketeers, I believe, are becoming more and more socially conscious, right? They are becoming more and more socially conscious. And therefore, they are reaching out a lot more to ASCI saying, okay, can we understand these guidelines better so that we don't get into trouble later, while we are treating itself can we have this in mind, we've already just in the last two months conducted two very large workshops for the entire marketing team of a group. So, one happened in December, one happened in November and there are more and more people asking for, you know, can you conduct this workshop? Can you understand this guideline better? Can we understand where the where the, you know, outliers are and therefore we don't cross those lines. So, I foresee that becoming a more and more important aspect of educating people, as I said, also trying to e-learning modules where, even if it's not a formal workshop, you know, bunch of individual youngsters, whether they're in college or in a working situation can easily log in online and get an understanding of that.

Host

Right. Thank you so much, Mr. Kamath for talking to us.