

Charu

Allow me to congratulate you and the team at MSL for winning some or rather most of the coveted awards for 2021. And this has certainly been an year of reinventing ourselves and keeping the communication mode always on. So handling mandates on squeeze margins while maintaining robust operations, infusing creativity, even in the mundane, what has been your winning formula?

Guest

Firstly, thank you, for all your kind words, it's been a really, really tough here, we thought 2020 would be tough, but 21 was much tougher from every sense of the word. I don't think there has been any one formula that we tried that helped us during the course of the year, what we really did was stay very honest, integrity and all the ways, that a pandemic here brought to the bear. So we just, we just stuck to the basics very well. I think there was a bit of luck, also. And I say luck, because there's a lot of things that are gone wrong, that thankfully they did not. But yes, there were a lot of vulnerabilities. And there was tons of love. We had so much collegiality genuine collegiality, genuine empathy, compassion that we saw within our colleagues, that it was almost inspiring the way some of our colleagues went out of their way to help other colleagues, their families. we stuck to the basics, we believed in each other. And we took one day at a time. I mean, there is no winning formula that we applied, we just hunkered down and did the best. That's really the sum of it. All.

Charu

No, of course, luck only favors those who help themselves. And clearly that's been very evident from some of the campaigns which I have been privy to as well. So the common sentiment doing the rounds is that this is the best time for PR firms, as brands and businesses step up their communications, a lot has changed in these last 20 Odd months. And what are those key trends which are likely to dominate in 2022?

Guest

Well, I think we will always, even before the pandemic on a growing trajectory of establishing ourselves as a very important management discipline. What has happened in these 20 Odd months, to my mind, first and foremost, has been a very robust business continuity. So we have been very adaptive, I think that goes with us, as folks who work on the agency side, there's a certain amount of agility that is expected from us. And I think that held us in good stead. So we were agile, we were adaptive. So that allowed us to very quickly pivot and work remotely in a way that continued our Client Services and client delivery. And in a manner in which that happened was, I think, mostly seamless. I won't say it was completely seamless. There was some tech technology challenges, but I think very quickly, in a period of two to four weeks, we were very successfully, you know, able to overcome it. But what that allowed us to do is that allowed us to be close to our clients close to our clients needs, also close to the overall stakeholder sentiments, because sensitization of messaging became very Very crucial timing of messaging became very, very crucial. We also realize that clients started valuing our counsel significantly more. And that's because perhaps they also had more bandwidth. And I'm talking about CXOs, not just the CCOs. So the comms heads are always available to us, and we engage as needed. But this time, we also saw a significant layering of CXOs, who also wanted to hear our opinion on how to maintain business continuity, how they should best communicate with their stakeholders, and what

should they be mindful of? And so that allowed us to elevate the quality of our partnership significantly. Right. So that said, I think it is also a myth that it's a purple patch for PR firms, PR firms have had to really struggle, we had a massive impact, let there be no bones about it, that we were very lucky, we pivoted, we got, you know, we managed our cost base. If you asked me in my entire tenure so far at MSL, I mean, my proudest achievement hasn't been all these awards and anything else. But it has been just the single fact that with such a massive business impact, we were still not to touch a single, you know, head in terms of people, so we never let go of a single person. And also we did not touch a single salary. Yes, we were unable to give increment. But, you know, which we finally did in 2021, as things started getting better, but we had a massive impact. I lost, very meaty chunk of my business. I have recovered only a part of it. Also, it's been a very, very satisfying journey, where we really realized that, yeah, our clients are right up there. Their value systems are something that echo with us, largely, having said that, there were also a few clients, which were very disappointing. I felt that they had the ability to continue operations. And yet they use the environment to exploit the agency by, you know, beating us on our fee, or resourcing or wanting to make the most of us and I felt that was rather stay close to each other, support each other as we waited through the year and ups and downs, the unceavoidable. And it was disappointing. And we, of course, over a period of time stopped working with such clients. Because we just felt that we weren't set up for long term success. But that said, it's a period where there are challenges and the challenges haven't all gone away Charu, we still see challenges springing up in different ways. Business was a challenge in 2020. Talent was even more bigger challenge in 2021. Because for pretty much, you know, our attrition was below par. In 2020, understandably, there were very little there was so much uncertainty, but it caught up and overshot. What is our, you know, acceptable attrition level in 2021. So we have a talent, a massive talent issue right now, which is both chronic and acute. So we've all you know, we've gone through phases where we have acute phases of dealing with some part of our business, and talent has been cyclical. But now for the last six to nine months. The problem is magnified. It's both acute, and it is chronic. It's just not going away.

Charu

Yeah, no, I think that's an industry wide problem. And we will come back to talent in a bit and I completely agree with you. This has been the roughest patch. I mean, 2021 was literally invisible, right? It was really an extension of 2022 I know we all of us did pivot and MSL did come out in a way, big way. Coming back to trends while PR will grow in demand, will data literacy be a prerequisite for PR?

Guest

Slowly and steadily, yes. Because you see, we work across the spectrum. When we look at PR it's now a wide portfolio of or a bouquet of services that we offer. And it's not one over the other because most of our clients want everything and we feel that lot of the clients love to hear Fancy words and terms and terminology, which makes them look smart or make us look smart, or at least from a conversation point of view. But largely, we are still driven by a lot of the legacy metrics, a lot of the legacy business is a function of the legacy that we have enjoyed. So slowly and steadily, we are seeing a transition. But it's not as fast as I would ideally like it to be. Our we have invested significantly in data and analytics, we have a strategy and insights function where we have couple of colleagues who are, you know, 100%, dedicated to creating data driven campaigns, and a whole bunch of tools that we have deployed, but I'll be lying, if I said that I'm very happy with the progress, we'll be at it. Don't get me wrong, it's time will

come. But it's still on the road to finding its real role on one side, one side there is digitization, which has happened significantly. And by digitization, you know, the data and the digitization is not the part that has come to the fore digitization, which is a technology absorption has come to the fore. So the channels have been digitized. But I think some of the larger aspects of the ecosystem, which I think where data can bring more planning and more strategy to the code. That is still a gap.

Charu

Yeah, no, I think as a country, we are still lacking where data is concerned. So I mean, as a sector, I think we are doing our best. I mean, yes, the speed could have been faster. But yeah, I think we've covered a lot of ground in the last couple of years. So you know, just going to ask you something about social media experts believe that we are likely to see a slow decline of social media. What do you have to say about that?

Guest

Well, I beg to differ. So I really feel social media will keep evolving. Social media will mirror society. Society has its ups and downs, society has new platforms, new place, and therefore social media will keep throwing up new platforms. So you know, what we are seeing in Facebook, in this view of target visa, we meta is just, you know, we're just scratching the surface, I mean, what's going to come through in meta in the next coming days is something that I am looking forward to because they have kind of decided to, you know, reboot themselves as a platform and be more relevant. Second, I think, I think, clearly, there are so many new aspects of social media that we keep discovering, some of them become a phenomena based on the need. And I'm talking here about clubhouse, which I thought was a brilliant, brilliant app, because it created, you know, voice connectivity, it gave a platform, and I was a part of a few discussions, I made some friends, some contacts, some old contacts that I reestablished relationships with, and it was wonderful. When you stuck at home and you have all the time in the world, specially post working hours, a great way to keep in touch with some really, really interesting groups. we deployed clubhouse, selectively for some of our client campaigns. And we did see some very good results audio connectivity is a big thing now, I mean, we know that Twitter started spaces, it probably done. Okay, okay. Club house of course started the whole thing. And their audio quality is just fantastic. I also feel there are a lot of people who are looking forward to LinkedIn now. So once LinkedIn audio rooms come through, and LinkedIn has become fairly significant intellectual platform, where I hope there is no spamming. And I hope some of the other stuff that we see in other platforms doesn't come in, because it's very professional. And I hope it continues but I'm looking forward to that as well. So social media will keep evolving, there will be some parts of it which will diminish in terms of the relevance, some of them will reinvent and you will keep seeing the flowering of new options.

Charu:

So in the year gone by we see a lot more instances of product recalls, be it by P&G or Coke's minute maid, kes, and we don't order how product recall if not handled right, could be damaging to the brand reputation. From the communication perspective, what are some of the things companies tend to go wrong on or tend to kind of miss on when handling brand recall?

Guest

Well, this is a sensitive subject. And brand recalls, are obviously, you know, very strong inflection points for the organization, because it also reflects the value systems, the larger commitment to the community that the firm or the organization has, right. So I think the biggest problem is the the time it has it takes for organizations to take a stand. And that's fine, because so many years of r&d has probably gone into it so much has invested behind a particular product or service, that when you're trying to recall it, it has to be a very vetted process, right. That process takes a bit of time. And that's where the problem lies. I think there needs to be a Plan B, at the very start of any project And we need to recall should be shortened. My only problem is by the time it becomes so apparent and it goes up to the CXO level to take a call. Some damage is already done.

Charu

Let's talk about talent and skill sets a discussion with never fails to touch your role now. I think as an industry, we are far more experimental and empathetic than we ever were. So how do you think 2022 will shape up on the skills front for the industry.

Guest

So for me skills is of course as crucial as it is but it's secondary to the attitude. The real fabric of our offering is the attitude of our colleagues that collectively is the attitude of the organization and therefore some manifestation of the culture. The point of an attitude is where I have an issue, I think we are now seeing such a huge and exciting inclusion of talent which is coming through but that talent wants to do work of a certain kinds of these are not just millennials these are post millennials and their aspirations their yardsticks are significantly different. you could have all the knowledge in the world, you could have all the skill sets in the world to deliver on the client. But if you don't have the attitude, that allows you to put the client at the center of the universe to work around their needs in a way that they feel that you're a genuine partner, all of those are secondary, they don't even come into play. And my biggest challenge is to bridge that attitude gap.

Charu

I think this is a discussion, one can go on and on. think we really need to keep evolving when it comes to solutions.

Guest

what's also happening is because digital has given a completely new dimension to PR.

Charu

Yeah.

Guest

You are such wonderful youngsters coming with such brilliant qualifications, that is very, very encouraging and very enthusing overall. So it's not a grim picture overall, as I'm saying. Yes, there are challenges, but there are some very bright spots and we will be at it till we track it, if it always track it.

Charu

Yes, absolutely. So when we talk about PR and communications, no discussion can be completed that measurement. So we've come a long way from our add value equivalent formulas with evolving technology, how can we bring in some of that in a campaign measurement to show better impact?

Guest

So I mean, the most obvious part for us is to do integrated work, right? Because the metrics on digital are very transparent. Whether it's from engagement or from a reach point of view, you can show the efficacy on a campaign in a much more evident manner which is both relatable and understandable to all concerns. Right. So I think one way is that that's the part that's moving. I think the second part is, again, it's been a work in progress discussion for as long as one has discussed, or grappled with the measurement issue. And you see, the quantitative measurement is, at best, giving you a 30% evaluation of what you're doing, it is important to an extent. And when I say quantitative, all of that part gets in, right? The region or the, to some extent, AVE as well, because even today, there are some clients who wanted. And these are, by the way, some of them are global clients, because there are auditory requirements for some, and you cannot go away from those because those are built into systems. But there is still no talk of qualitative profiling of our campaigns right now, because that takes money. Yeah, when you do have, let's say, you do a focus group around a particular issue. And after intervention or doing a bunch of campaigns, maybe in six months to a 12 month period, can we go to a focus group before and after to understand that there is a qualitative, you know, difference in the mindset, we don't know yet. And when we go to the clients, the clients love it when we talk. But I still don't see any client yet having the budgets or having the, you know, stomach to say, Okay, let's put some research because public relations as a discipline is seen to be significantly cost effective compared to some of the other mass media disciplines, right. If you put crores of rupees in a mass media campaign, it's okay to say, Okay, I'm going to spend, you know, a few lakhs on our first project to see how we did, but I don't see that happening. So that will work in progress. We have seen limited success where there have been integrated campaigns, which means mass format media campaigns with a very strong public relations leg and there we have seen how PR has played a role in adding credibility to the messaging. But measurement is, honestly today, there are so many ways you can look at it. We actually go client by client category by category, some categories are better at it, some are not. Some of them who are more digitally inclined, get at least a digital metrics. So we are better than where we are. But I don't think we've cracked the riddle on this one yet.

Guest

I think the work, and the value value of what we do is increasingly being understood. The only challenge is that how valuable is it? Because that's subjectivity, we can only take out once we have the data of validated data to support us. So that's still work in progress. And that's, that's frustrating in parts. Yeah.

Charu

Of course, change is never easy, right? I mean, the onus lies on us to bring in that awareness. I think I think we are making progress. And I'm sure very soon we could only lead up to that by and that you know, that same commitment in terms of budgets and understanding where mass media gets, in fact, probably more. So last. No, thank you so much for joining us on Mrigashira, pleasure speaking with you.

Guest

Not at all Charu. Thank you. Please stay safe and best wishes to all.